

## Speaking Notes from Gordon Harris, MCIP, Principal, Harris Consulting Inc., Vancouver

Over the next 25 years, the number of Canadians aged 65 and older will double from 4.1 million today to 8.7 million.

For those seniors living in older city neighborhoods and small towns, there are nearby shops and services within walking distance. There is bus and taxi service for those times when seeing a Doctor or visiting friends requires a trip outside the neighborhood.

But for more than half of Canada's elderly population who reside in one of the nation's many rapidly growing suburbs, there are no stores within walking distance and sometimes no bus service to the nearest shopping area.

As a consequence, social interaction for those who experience difficulty in getting around is limited and the sense of community belonging is lost. They also experience a loss of independence, relying on family and friends for assisting with simple daily trips to the store or bank adding to the stress and strain of everyday life.

For a growing number of older Canadians, suburban life is no longer enjoyable.

Suburbs are terrible places to grow old, especially if growing old brings any loss of mobility or other infirmities.

Suburbs are fine as long as residents have a car and their health and mobility. Without these necessities, the suburbs become a hostile and unsupportive living environment.

Many older suburban residents continue to drive simply because there is no other option. A recent Transport Canada study of 65-plus drivers between 1988-89 found that the proportion of fatal collisions involving elderly drivers jumped by 50% to 15.5% in 1998, up from 10.5% in 1988. Injuries increased to 11.5% from 8.1% in the same period.

As people age, their physical and neurological mobility can diminish. Recognizing this, planners need to design suburbs that assist with the transition out of the vehicle.

Our highly suburbanized cities create a number of challenges for anyone who has trouble getting around on their own. As planners, we need to make sure that our cities work for everyone – now and when we find ourselves less mobile.

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Following the “new urbanism” and “smart growth” example, the following principles are fundamental in creating accessible neighborhoods that allow older citizens to age-in-place while leading an independent and social lifestyle:

- **Promote compact and walkable neighborhoods** – Higher density housing at or near the neighborhood nodes and in close proximity to public transit and other amenities.
  - ▶ Noord Holland's definition of a senior-friendly zone as: “areas with appropriate and affordable dwellings, situated within 500 meters ... from the mail services for the elderly: shops, public transit, medical facilities, post office and recreation facilities.”
- **Encourage mixed-use zones** – Housing integrated with commercial and community uses reduces the distance between these uses and thus eliminates reliance on a vehicle.
- **Provide a range of housing options** – Alternative housing options such as townhouses, condominiums, secondary suites and granny flats can address the need for a smaller and more

accessible residence. Specialized congregate or assisted living senior facilities are important to ensure seniors can remain in their communities.

- **Concentrate new growth in existing areas** – Growth concentration creates a critical population mass to provide public transit to an area and to support retail shops and community services.
- **Link new development to public transit and other transportation options** – This ensures that transportation options other than the automobile are available on day one in a new community and can be relied upon if someone loses their mobility.

Municipalities must be sensitive to the needs of the aging population:

- Ensure that municipal policies and zoning bylaws are in place to create accessible communities with reduced automobile-dependency.
- Urban design must allow for paratransit service access, adequate ramping space at curb cuts for electric scooters and wheelchairs and wider sidewalks.

With a significant wave of aging Canadians about to break over our suburban landscape over the next century, planners face some big challenges to ensure that our suburbs become desirable to grow old.

We need to work together with health care professionals and all levels of government to ensure that we are planning for the inevitable increase in the number of older Canadians. And we need to remember it is not just old people who are isolated by and in the suburbs.