

# Meeting the Mobility Needs of an Aging Community

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For many age 65 and older (and younger), mobility is an everyday struggle in a world built for personal vehicles. Almost no one plans for the day they won't be able to drive, get around and go where they want or need to go when they want. Some ignore it because we fear it, but most ignore it because a lack of personal mobility is absolutely inconceivable. Without understanding it very well, we understand that loss of personal mobility has a huge impact on our quality of life – an impact we almost can't bear to consider.

## How Will We Move?

And yet, as we continue to age, the issue of personal mobility becomes more and more relevant. How will we move? What kind of support or assistance will be available to help us keep moving? What happens to the quality of life in a region where 20 percent or more of its citizens are unable to get around without some assistance? Where, every day, several thousand additional citizens find themselves without the capacity to get to the doctor or store, to see the grandkids, to attend church or synagogue – to go to the places that are part of living a vital life?

Every community in the United States is facing senior mobility challenges, and these challenges are becoming greater every year. The unprecedented growth of the senior population, coupled with major social and economic shifts that undermine the capacity of families and friends to provide traditional assistance to seniors facing mobility needs, is placing significant additional demands on community transportation systems. Today, these systems suffer from insufficient capacity, underinvestment and need for more political support.

## Kansas City's Challenges

Kansas City's mobility challenges are similar to other American cities, and the statistics are sobering. Research projections predict that the 65 and older population in the Kansas City region, over the next two decades, will shift from 10 to approximately 20 percent of the population.

And the picture is complicated. Our seniors want and need to continue to lead active involved lives. Many want or need to remain in the homes they currently occupy (many widely dispersed in less-densely-populated rural or suburban areas). Seniors' families, historically a key source of assistance, often have less and less capacity to meet needs due to hectic, two-career schedules, financial limitations and living further apart (a notable percentage of seniors' families do not live in the region).

Kansas City has additional challenges because it is a metro region that covers a much-larger-than-average geographic area. In spite of the best efforts of community and transportation system leaders, the Kansas City region's current senior mobility "system" lacks capacity to meet many of today's senior mobility needs – and will most certainly struggle to meet future needs. The challenges of the future predictably will be even greater if we as a region do not take the time today to organize a strategic and integrated approach.

## **KC Framework for Senior Mobility**

To help Kansas City leaders, planners and policy makers better understand and prepare to address the growing challenges of senior mobility, the “Kansas City Framework for Senior Mobility” project was initiated in 2007. The Framework project is facilitated by the Midwest Center for Nonprofit Leadership at UMKC, with financial and programmatic support from the Jewish Heritage Foundation and the Mr. Goodcents Foundation.

The Framework initiative engages and is supported by an exceptional array of regional experts and leaders in the fields of aging, transportation and urban planning, from the for-profit, government and nonprofit sectors. It is articulating needs, reporting other regions’ strategies and successes, and developing an array of options for communities to consider as we help the Kansas City region develop plans for a system that will adequately meet the mobility needs of our region’s seniors in 2015 and beyond.

It is the vision of the leaders of the Framework for Senior Mobility that, within 10 years, the Kansas City metropolitan region will have in place “a seamless, comprehensive, sustainable and adaptive system that can efficiently and effectively meet the mobility needs of the region’s senior citizens. This senior mobility system will help enhance the health, independence, and quality of life enjoyed by all Kansas City seniors.” They foresee a community that makes it possible for its citizens to age without losing the quality of life that we all cherish and seek.

## **Visible & Invisible Needs**

The Senior Mobility Framework for the region is designed to capture a large range of needs and circumstances. Some needs are pretty obvious, such as the need to reach the store or doctor. Some are not, such as sidewalks and parking lots design. The options for service levels needed must vary too – ranging from bus service at the corner, to curbside service, to door-to-door service, to actual assistance in even getting through the front door.

There are many facets to the challenges of senior mobility, challenges that may be invisible until they become personal challenges. For example, the ability of seniors to drive safely is affected by automobile designs and features, the size of roads and even the width of lanes of the roads, and the size of the signs that offer directions. Other challenges include things like the cost of gas, repairs, insurance, and all of the related economic issues that can be significant to citizens living on limited and fixed incomes. And once we are not able to drive, what other options are available and how well will they actually meet our needs?

## **System for the Future**

Each day in America, 20,000 people turn 60. And each year, for at least the next 20 years, this trend will continue. The graying of America is well underway! And where we are in Kansas City, so exceptionally dependent upon personal transportation to meet all of our mobility needs, is not where we can afford to be in the future.

Chronic illnesses, safety and even the financial burdens of personal vehicle ownership are moving us onto a path to “reengineer” how we age and move in our community. The path ahead will have changes and challenges, some very significant, and the Kansas City Framework for Senior Mobility is a resource to help us begin to move forward on a path that ensures that the Kansas City region will have a senior mobility system that will help enhance the health, independence and quality of life enjoyed by its seniors.