

Older Americans could be stranded without better transit

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Earlier this week, Transportation for America released a report called "Aging in Place: Stuck Without Options." It looks at how as the enormous baby boom generation gets older -- the way all of us do, until we die, that is -- access to transit is going to be a bigger and bigger problem.

Most people these days, the report points out, want to get old where they are currently living rather than move to a retirement community. "Aging in place" is what the demographers call it.

But aging in place is hard to do successfully and happily in communities that are built exclusively around the automobile.



It's not just a bus. It can mean freedom, connection, and independence.

Photo: Lynn Friedman

This is a problem. Not just for older people who want to stay in the communities they know and love even if they are no longer able to drive, or can't afford the expense of a car on a fixed income. It is also a problem for younger family members, who can end up with the responsibility of shuttling them around.

And it's a big problem for the community as a whole. Auto-dependent places naturally increase the pressure for older people to continue driving even if they can't do so safely -- endangering other road users. According to one study, fatality rates for drivers start climbing at 65, and the fatality rate for drivers over 85 is four times that for teenagers (another age group that suffers in auto-dependent places).

The Transportation for America report ranks the nation's metropolitan areas on transit access for seniors now and in 2015, and the numbers are grim. Even in transit-rich New York City, 41 percent of people between the ages of 65 and 79 will be without good transit access. In Atlanta, the number is 90 percent. (Los Angeles-Long Beach comes in with a surprisingly good 17 percent.) Nationally, those numbers add up:

Within the communities examined in this report more than 11.5 million Americans 65 and older lived with "poor" transit access in 2000. If most seniors get their wish to "age in place," by 2015, our analysis shows that this figure will increase to more than 15.5 million older Americans, meaning a substantial majority of that population will be faced with declining mobility options.

The report calls for increased federal transit funding, and lists several possible strategies to get transit access to hard-to-serve places. Community-based transit systems are one example -- like one in Riverside, Calif., that allows friends and neighbors to get financial compensation for documented trips they provide for seniors. And it calls for using federal policy and money to make these kinds of solutions possible.

None of this is radical stuff. Which is why you might wonder why Randal O'Toole, of the Cato Institute, is so outraged by the report.

O'Toole, whose anti-transit screeds are well-known in the transportation community, essentially dismisses people who have become too feeble to engage in the great American enterprise of motoring:

According to Transportation for America -- which is largely a shill for the transit industry -- the nation is about to face a new crisis: a shortage of mobility “options” for retiring baby boomers. According to a report published by the group on June 14, “By 2015, more than 15.5 million Americans 65 and older will live in communities where public transportation service is poor or non-existent.”

The appropriate answer to that, of course, is “So what?” Most seniors don’t ride transit....

[T]hink about it. Baby boomers have driven cars for almost their entire lives. Nearly all of them will keep driving until they are physically or mentally unable to do so. At that point, they are probably not going to be capable of walking the quarter mile to the nearest bus stop or the half mile to the nearest rail stop that Transportation for America defines as “transit accessible.”

Those baby boomers who prefer transit over driving can do what everyone else does who prefers one set of services over another: locate to where the services they prefer are the greatest. In the case of transit riders, that generally means dense central cities.

O'Toole's argument (which contains a couple of misleading assertions, as T4A points out in a response) makes a bit more sense if you realize that the Cato Institute was founded and is funded by billionaire oil barons the Koch brothers. (Thanks for the reminder, Streetsblog.)

It follows in a pattern of reflexive anti-transit arguments from the libertarian right that stubbornly refuses to acknowledge a couple of key realities: First, highways and automobiles are a subsidized form of transportation, no matter how much some people might like to ignore that fact. And second, most Americans would like to have more choices about how they get around.

Yes, if you are a healthy, able-bodied person in the prime of your life, and you have the money to buy, insure, maintain, and fuel an automobile, you might think driving is a great way to move from point A to point B. But that is a set of qualifications that leaves an awful lot of people out. And if we're willing to pay for highways to help people get where they need to go, shouldn't we be thinking of creative ways to finance alternatives?

We were all once too young to drive ourselves. And if we're lucky, we may live long enough to one day be too old.

(Full disclosure: I used to work for Streetsblog, which partnered with Transportation for America on communications issues.)

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