As Americans age, they look to live in communities where they can remain active and have transportation options once they are no longer able to drive. That’s a big concern for a state like Connecticut, which is largely thought of as a car-centric state.

“By 2025, 20 percent or more of almost every Connecticut town will be 65 and older,” said Christianne Kovel, senior policy analyst on aging at the Connecticut Commission on Women, Children and Seniors. “Connecticut, while it’s a small state, has areas that are very, very rural. ... Public transportation is not an option.”

The state Legislature has charged Kovel’s non-partisan, public policy research office with working with policymakers and stakeholders to come up with policies that can make Connecticut communities more livable for seniors to age in place and continue to get around.

“Livable communities are basically ... where people want to grow up and grow older in,” Kovel said. “These are areas that offer affordable, accessible and diverse housing, transportation options, public buildings and spaces, all sorts of opportunities for community engagement.”

One part of making communities livable is a focus on complete streets, which are streets designed for safe access by all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders. In many communities around the country, the roads may have been engineered with one goal in mind: moving cars quickly. But that can make life difficult for seniors and others trying to navigate that
“It is amazing how hard it is to fix these problems once you’ve made them,” said Beth Osborne, vice president for technical assistance at Transportation for America, who has worked with the states of Florida, Michigan and Vermont to implement complete streets policies. “Part of aging in place is being able to take care of your daily needs and if you can’t drive, in most communities that means you can’t take care of your daily needs. … Many people are hit by cars and harmed just trying to cross the street to reach a destination.”

Osborne is particularly proud of progress made in Florida, a state that is home to an ever-burgeoning senior population and one that has consistently ranked high in pedestrian deaths per capita.

“Florida has been off to the races,” Osborne said. “They are re-writing their entire state design guide … to get rid of a lot of the rules that are very typical of states that make it impossible to build a complete street, rules that push engineers to design wide, fast lanes and require them to go through a (time-consuming) and difficult exceptions process to do anything different.”

The enactment and implementation of more complete streets policies around the country, even in particularly rural states like West Virginia and Indiana, is an encouraging sign to Jana Lynott, senior strategic policy advisor at AARP, who manages the organization’s transportation research agenda. But Lynott remains concerned that state governments haven’t done enough when it comes to the policies AARP recommends to serve boomers as they reach retirement age.

“We’re actually seeing … a loss in progress where states had enacted policies (and) mandates to form interagency coordination committees in order to better coordinate their human services and public transportation services,” said Lynott. “We’re actually seeing a number of those expiring or their committees no longer meeting and just going defunct.”

And while many states and communities have invested in public transportation, not every older American is well served by transit.

“Only about 26 percent of boomers actually live in central cities where the public transportation services would be at their best,” Lynott said. “Given the changing demographics, it would seem that while we could all benefit from investments in public transportation broadly, it’s not a bad idea to carve out a certain amount of that additional revenue for senior transportation services for people who are not able to use the fixed-route public transportation service.”

Lynott said boomers want more on-demand types of transportation, such as rideshare services—also known as transportation network companies, or TNCs. But she also cautioned that if these services are to be an essential part of the transportation network serving seniors, additional training of drivers may be needed. Transit agencies in Boston and elsewhere have partnered with companies like Uber and Lyft to fill a need for more on-demand paratransit services.

“I think this is extremely important as public agencies are looking to lower their service costs by signing on through contracts with TNCs (that they make) sure these drivers know how to lift individuals if they need assistance getting in and out of the vehicle, how to do that properly without hurting the individual passenger or themselves,” said Lynott.

Lynott also would like to see TNCs that allow caregivers to remotely schedule a ride for their loved one and be able to track where they are via an app.

Analysts say the introduction of autonomous vehicles in the years to come would seem to hold promise as well, regardless of whether they take the place of personal vehicles or serve a more
“I think both TNCs in the more immediate term and autonomous vehicles longer term do offer the potential to improve mobility for everyone, including older adults,” Lynott said. “But I think there is a need, especially through state policy, that state policymakers be looking at the rollout of these new technologies and services in a way that best meets older adults’ needs.”

The AARP Livability Index

The AARP Livability Index scores communities for livability across seven categories, including transportation. Among the transportation characteristics tracked: the frequency of local transit service, walking trips per household per day, hours spent in traffic congestion per year, household transportation costs, the safety of streets as determined by speed limits and crash rates, and the accessibility of transit stations and vehicles. Among the policies AARP recommends to increase livability: state and local complete streets policies, state human services transportation coordination, state volunteer driver policies, and state and local plans to create age-friendly communities. The Livability Index can be accessed at: www.aarp.org/livabilityindex [2].

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