

This article is the second of a four-part series that will look at the concept of and local efforts toward creating a livable community for all ages in the Wichita and surrounding areas. The first article, published in the April issue of Active Aging, covered the concept of livable communities. This article looks at the mixed-use neighborhoods and some of Wichita's efforts toward creating a more livable community.

Creating local livable communities

By Amy Geiszler-Jones

When it comes to creating neighborhoods that integrate homes, shops and other services and having a viable transportation system to create a better livable community, Wichita can take a page from its past, says one local expert.

Livable communities is the term that planners and aging experts are using to define creating communities that are promoting and enhancing the quality of life for older Americans

After decades of urban sprawl, low gas prices and cars that made personal transportation affordable and easy, the appeal of large yards in suburban areas, and no real demand for the neighborhoods of the past, it may be harder for Wichita to go back to those aspects of its historic past, said John Wong, a Wichita native and public administration expert.

Wong, professor and interim director of Wichita State's Hugo Wall School of Urban and Public Affairs, was one of the experts who spoke at an aging-in-place workshop last year, "Revitalizing Communities for All Generations: Visioning a Livable Wichita Region."

The workshop was one of 12 that were held nationwide and sponsored by the National Association for Area Agencies on Agencies along with the nonprofit Partners for Livable Communities, MetLife and the local Central Plains Area Agency on Aging. More than 100 participants from not only senior service agencies but from the planning, building and government sectors, along with private citizens, attended the Wichita workshop.

Wichita's past

Getting around in Wichita was a lot easier before the introduction of family cars and paved roads, Wong noted. Since people didn't drive around, the mixed-used concept, even within a single building that might house a bank, another local business and apartments, became a matter of efficiency.

Mixed-use developments are those that integrate homes, businesses, community centers and schools into the neighborhood, or even one facility. Retail and other services are nearer to homes, often within walking distance, meaning less reliance on transportation.

"Everything was premised in the past on the hub-and-spoke transportation system and was more geared toward centralization and mixed use," Wong said, about Wichita's early days. In the hub-and-spoke model, the system has one centralized center with routes radiating out from that center.

Several factors led to Wichita dismantling its streetcar system and decentralizing neighborhoods, Wong said. As people started buying cars and paved roads came along, running streetcars was no longer financially feasible. Public buses were seen as less costly and more flexible to fill the need for public transportation. Malls started sprouting up in the 1970s, leading to the emptying of downtown.

As Baby Boomers married and had families, they sought more open spaces. Cheaper land values around Wichita made it more lucrative for developers to buy up land and carve it up into separate residential and commercial spaces.

“Traditional zoning is drawing boxes and that’s the preference when land value is down and it’s easy to get around,” said Wong. Within those boxes tend to be very specific zoning requirements, such as commercial or residential, and more rigid land-use policies.

A ‘Great Place’

There are a couple of places within Wichita where developers have created a mixed-use, intergenerational community, with Old Town being a prime example. In fact, the efforts to create a concentrated, vibrant community with a large public plaza, a farmer’s market, theaters, restaurants, businesses and residents earned Old Town the designation as one of the “Great Places in America” in 2008 by the American Planning Association, Wong noted in his presentation.

If Wichitans want more of these types of communities, they need to start indicating a demand, said Wong.

“Legally, everything is in place to have this done,” said Wong, referring to the Kansas statutes that dictate local planning commissions need to consider community needs for land use, zoning and such.

Sustainability, however, is a major consideration, said Wong. David Barber, advanced plans manager with the Wichita-Sedgwick County Metropolitan Area Planning Department, agrees with that point.

Barber noted this kind of development requires private investors, and that’s been a shortcoming for creating these kinds of neighborhoods.

Another consideration is the cost it takes to rehab or renovate existing neighborhoods.

“It’s more expensive to redevelop than to start from scratch,” said Scott Knebel, principal planner with the MAPD.

Making plans

There is some activity going on within Wichita and Sedgwick County to create more livable communities, outside of redevelopment, said local planning officials.

For example, the Wichita Transit Authority is set to release a new plan for Wichita's transit system this summer, after conducting a community survey in 2008.

Working off a 1993 Comprehensive Plan, the city and county continue to make improvements in pedestrian and bike paths. Fiscal constraints have prevented governmental officials from updating the plan, Barber noted, but progress in neighborhoods still continues.

Work was set to begin in April to paint bike lanes onto some downtown streets. A bike lane, albeit only one-half mile long, has already been striped onto Mount Vernon, near George Washington Boulevard, said Barber and Knebel.

Elevated railways, side streets and other such obstacles make it difficult to create bikeways in some areas, but they will probably become a more common sight.

In addition to the Comprehensive Plan, various neighborhoods also have specific plans, Barber noted. Citizens do have input on those plans, he said. They also have access to the plans online, by going to www.wichita.gov and clicking on the planning link on the left-hand menu column.

Citizen input is a key factor for any city making plans about its future, Wong pointed out.

"You have to participate," he said.

By attending public meetings and talking to civic and elected leaders about how they'd like to see their community develop, citizens can get involved, public administration officials advise.

For example, the Metropolitan Planning Area Commission, comprising 14 volunteers appointed by the Wichita City Council and Sedgwick County Board of Commissioners, holds public hearings and makes recommendations to the governing bodies concerning zoning, subdivision applications, and other development related issues. The group, whose regular meetings are also open to the public, is responsible for developing and maintaining the Comprehensive Plan for Wichita and Sedgwick County, according to its Web site.

Online resources

To read more about the livable community concept, go to:

www.aginginplaceinitiative.org

www.n4a.org

www.cpaaa.org

To read more about the Wichita-Sedgwick County Comprehensive Plan and individual neighborhood plans, go to:

www.wichita.gov/CityOffices/Planning/

