

## Livable Communities in Binghamton: A True Collaborative Effort

*“As we grow older, will our community be ready for us?”*

The American Association of Retired Persons recently released a report finding many American communities ill-prepared for an aging population.<sup>i</sup> This finding is no trivial matter. Recent census bureau reports unanimously predict a dramatic surge in our elder population. The U.S. Census Bureau expects the population aged 65 and older to double in size within the next 30 years.<sup>ii</sup> Demographic studies focusing on New York State confirm these trends.

AARP believes that, as a nation, it is up to our local communities to support successful aging. Indeed, relevant literature confirms a link between community environments and the health and vitality of its elder residents. Other studies point to the desire of seniors to “age in place.” It is clear that there is a growing demand for livable communities – “those that provide affordable and appropriate housing, supporting community features and services, and adequate transportation and mobility options.”<sup>iii</sup> The question remains as follows: how has the call for livable communities been answered in the City of Binghamton?

In this paper, I evaluate the way in which the City of Binghamton is responding to the community needs of seniors and others through collaborative community development. I first examine significance of the development of Livable Communities in light of the area’s changing demographics. This report then turns to the development of a collaborative community development process invested in increasing Binghamton’s livability for seniors. I discuss several active efforts underway that bring together various social service agencies, public officials, committed community members, and others. Special consideration will be given to the role that Binghamton University plays as a partner in these efforts. I conclude with a look towards what lies in the future of ongoing efforts in collaborative community development.

### **Our Changing Population**

It is expected that the next few decades will see an unprecedented “Age Boom” on a national scale. The increasing population of Americans ages 65 and older is due to a number of factors. For one, life expectancies are on the rise. According to the National Institute on Aging, the age group 85 and older is now the fastest growing population in the United States. Compounded with this trend is the aging of our Baby Boomers who in 2006 crossed the

threshold into the 60+ age category. As a result, dramatic and rapid changes in our population are predicted.<sup>iv</sup>

If these demographic forecasts come to pass, the future has serious implications for local community. The elderly population represents 20.7% of the total population of Broome County. Among the 63 counties in New York State, Broome ranks 6<sup>th</sup> in its concentration of seniors.<sup>v</sup>

Furthermore, data from the 2000 Census indicates that while the population of Broome County declined of 5.5% in the 1990's, the population of aging citizens has been growing. Significant increases had been seen in the age 75 and above population, which grew by 18.8%. An even more dramatic increase in population has been occurring in the age 80 and older age cohort, which grew by more than 30% in ten years.<sup>vi</sup>

A critical examination of New York State demographic information reveals another striking pattern – the loss of the “next generation” from the region. A recent study conducted at the Department of Economic Development has confirmed this trend. Young people are leaving Upstate New York in droves. The problem occurs when there is a lack of “brain gain;” in other words, when young professionals are failing to move into Upstate New York at the same rate as they are moving out. While the elder population of New York state has increased significantly between 1990–2000, the population of 20–34 year-olds decreased by 22%. Among 25 to 29 year-olds, an even more startling population decline of 29% was seen in this ten-year time period.<sup>vii</sup>

The out-migration of young people from Upstate New York is often referred to as a “Brain Drain.” Indeed, separate census analyses have found emigration rates to be highest among college graduates.<sup>viii</sup> With no “Brain Gain” occurring, the flight of young educated people from many counties in Upstate New York has significant social and economic consequences. As the New York Times reports, “while the chronic economic woes upstate have been of growing concern for a decade or more, the accelerating departure of young people is considered particularly alarming.”<sup>ix</sup>

### **New Challenges and Opportunities for Our Communities**

It seems clear that in order for our state and our city to thrive, we must take a new, transformative look at our communities.

The AARP has been a strong advocate in this effort. We must work to reform our communities so that they are supportive of persons of all ages. In doing so, we cannot limit ourselves to issues of “economic growth, or sprawl, or the consideration of scarce resources.” Instead, we must view issues of development on a “personal level.” We must ensure that our communities are “livable” and amenable to the life of all residents.<sup>x</sup>

What is a livable community? According to the AARP definition, it is “one that has affordable and appropriate housing, supportive community features and services, and adequate mobility options, which together facilitate personal independence and the engagement of residents in civic and social life.”<sup>xi</sup>

As AARP and others involved in the Geriatric issues advocate for Livable Community development, they are not alone. On the state level, similar action is currently taking place to combat the Brain Drain trend. Former First Lady of New York State, Silda Wall Spitzer, had been planning a large-scale initiative to address the problems and concerns of young New Yorkers. Last year, Ms. Spitzer organized the ILIVENY summit, a gathering of leaders from business, community, and the academic sectors. The issues that sprung up the addressed the concerns that young New Yorkers face will take community-level reform. One key stakeholder in Ms. Spitzer's summit shared a similar view:

“The problem our young people are facing isn't the weather, and it isn't the nightlife. They absolutely want to live in Upstate New York, but they need good jobs, affordable housing and livable communities and they are not finding them.”<sup>xii</sup>

The remaking of communities in fitting standards of “livability” benefits residents across generational lines. Community features such as walkability are appreciated by people young and old. Studies have found that social interactions between significantly older and younger people contribute to positive feelings on both sides.

These social, economic, and demographic changes present new challenges for our communities. At the same time, however, they offer an extraordinary opportunity. The present task for cities across New York State will be to remake their communities so that they are “livable” for all residents. “Today’s shortcomings will be exacerbated...in the next three decades” warns the AARP report. The question remains: Is the City of Binghamton preparing itself to meet future challenges?

### **Binghamton's Commits to Livable Communities**

The answer, coming from many sectors of the Binghamton community, is a resounding yes. Recently, a city-wide collaboration has sprung up to address the development of “Livable Communities.” The past few years have seen a growing collaboration between key public, private, consumer, and social service organizations working toward this end.

One leader in the Livable Communities efforts is Assemblymember Donna Lupardo. She recently issued a statement recognizing the city, as well as her own, dedication to the issue:

“The increasing number of seniors in Broome County presents opportunities for economic development and quality of life that we cannot ignore. In addition, we need to expand existing services and resources to enable seniors to remain in their own homes and out of nursing homes.”<sup>xiii</sup>

As a city, Binghamton has taken on the challenge of developing elder-friendly Livable Communities. Indeed, work done as a result of collaborative community planning is

progressing and moving towards higher levels of integration and success. At present, one key partner is Binghamton University. Looking towards the future, there is even more potential for the University's involvement in developing Livable Communities.

### **Development of a Collaborative Community Planning Process**

The history of the Livable Communities initiative in Binghamton begins with the Aging Futures Partnership, a group that has been working to improve the long-term care system for seniors since its inception in 1989. Its diverse members include consumers; educational institutions; faith-based organizations; and a variety of public, private, and not-for-profit agencies. Together, the partners have been realizing the mission of the Partnership: "Creating and strengthening community systems, thus enabling persons age 60 and over to maintain the highest quality of life."<sup>xiv</sup>

In 2002, Aging Futures was awarded a planning grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through its National Community Partnership for Older Adults Initiative. The grant supported the Partnership as it began a huge undertaking. A year after having received the award, the Partnership "assessed the needs of Broome County's elderly, identified the issues that older adults view as priorities, and outlined a strategic plan of action to address these priority needs."<sup>xv</sup>

Soon afterwards, the Partnership collaborated with the Broome County Office for the Aging to host a community forum. The forum did more than highlight results from the months-long research. It challenged community members to join Aging Futures in addressing seniors' needs and wants. The round-table discussions were responsible for community-generated objectives for concrete action.<sup>xvi</sup>

### **Movement towards Livable Communities**

When the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant was near depletion, the Aging Futures Partnership began looking to the future. There was widespread recognition that Community Partnerships was a good course of action for all involved.

By this time, the movement towards developing Livable Communities was occurring in cities around the country. There was a proliferation of academic literature on the topic, ranging from sources such as the AARP as well as "Best Practices" case studies. It became apparent that the Livable Communities movement could be realized right here in Binghamton.

The Livable Communities standard was not just a theoretical aspiration - it was already occurring in practice. In 2005, Broome County's Community Alternative Systems Agency (CASA) was a winner in a "Livable Communities for All Ages" Competition. Sponsored by the Administration on Aging, the competition recognized CASA for its Nursing Home-to-Community program. The award represented the great strides Broome County was already making to help older adults to "age in place."<sup>xvii</sup>

As the Aging Futures Partnership continued to convene, a lot of momentum was building around the Livable Communities phenomenon. There seemed to be great potential for community-wide collaboration. “There are many others in the community who want to see this area grow, and they, too, are seeing the concept of Livable Communities as one that can be incorporated into what they are doing.”<sup>xviii</sup>

The benefits of Livable Communities (and of collaborative action) became clear to a whole host of area leaders. At one recent meeting, attendees discussed the positive outcomes that would ensue. These included:

- Economic Growth
- Attractiveness
- Satisfied Residents
- Increased Tourism
- Increase in Business Investment
- Vibrant and Strong Community<sup>xix</sup>

It seems clear that a commitment to better the lives of the older adults in our community will surely benefit the Binghamton area at large. Currently, a number of different initiatives towards this end are actively taking place. The Aging Futures Partnership continues to be the convener of people and agencies, just as it had been a catalyst for community collaboration in years past.

The strength of this Partnership lies in the commitment to the Livable Communities model. Along with that commitment, the lasting success of the Partnership will be dependent on the network of individual and organizational relationships that are built along the journey of building an elder-friendly community. The last few years have seen great successes in both of these senses.

### **Starting with Elder-friendly Housing**

One of the first issues that the Livable Communities Collaboration tackled was the need for senior-friendly housing. The availability of appropriate housing options significantly influences a senior’s ability to remain independent. Toward this end, a number of initiatives are currently underway.

Assemblymember Donna Lupardo has been spearheading action in this area. Ms. Lupardo’s office convenes a housing group that is functioning as an ad-hoc committee of Aging Futures.<sup>xx</sup> Due in large part to her leadership, a number successful initiatives are making headway toward developing Livable Communities in Binghamton.

One such initiative has been a move to educate municipalities to respond to the demands of senior housing. This collaborative project includes such agencies as the Southern Tier Home Builders Association, the Office for Aging, and Assemblymember Lupardo’s committee. Together, the joint initiative has coordinated a “Cluster Development & Incentive

Zoning” training program. The training is has practically educated Broome County municipalities on how zoning restrictions impact the construction of elder-friendly homes. Moreover, it offers techniques to improve development, preserve open space, and reduce the costs of building senior housing.

Another joint effort has been taken to educate the community as a whole. The Aging Futures Partnership has been working with the Southern Tier Home Builders and Remodelers Association to administer its annual “Home Show.” For the past two years, the Home Show has coordinated educational seminars targeted to seniors planning to rebuild or remodel their home. According to an Aging Futures Publication, the seminars “show how universal design and energy efficient building products can make homes more livable and will enable people to remain independent in their home as they age.”<sup>xxi</sup>

As the AARP Report on Livable Communities has found, “older people feel more isolated when their homes do not meet their physical needs.”<sup>xxii</sup> At the same time, studies have shown that most seniors desire to “age in place.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Through developing senior-friendly housing, Binghamton is building a community that supports an active and engaged older population.

### **Ongoing Collaborative Efforts towards Becoming a Livable Community**

In addition to efforts in developing senior-friendly housing, a number of other collaborative initiatives are taking place. Representatives from housing, city government, transportation, law, construction, health and long term care are studying best practices in Livable Communities. Moreover, they are critically evaluating how our local services and resources can be more responsive to seniors. Suggestions about transportation, the business community, social connections, housing and services are starting to be integrated into a variety of planning efforts.

These initiatives are drawing people and agencies with little connection to elder issues but a great resolve to community development. From the New York State Department of Transportation, for example, Mark Bowers has gotten involved in the Livable Communities partnership. His work currently centers on developing a Greater Binghamton Greenway. In the process, he realized that construction of sidewalks and rail trails improve the quality of life of everyone, including seniors. Similarly, the Binghamton River Trails Commission is interested in developing city waterways for the benefit of all. Walkability and accessible transportation options are essential elements of a livable community.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The business sector, too, is actively working to become more senior-friendly. In December of 2007, Binghamton adopted the nationally-recognized Elder Friendly® Business Certification Program. The program (developed by Elder in Action in Maine) certifies local businesses that assure quality service and accessibility for older customers. A group consisting of older volunteers, staff members from Senator Libbous and Assemblymember Lupardo’s office, and other partner agencies worked together to bring the program to our area. Their collaboration came about after a meeting of the Aging Futures Partnership. Today, those local

businesses that are designated as Elder-Friendly display their certifications in their entryway. They illustrate the City's commitment to the civic engagement of older adults.<sup>xxv</sup>

The City of Binghamton has truly taken the concept of Livable Communities and made it our own. These aforementioned initiatives are just a sample of many ongoing endeavors. Last year, a meeting on Livable Communities in Binghamton included thirty-eight participants. These participants include members from many different agencies with varying missions, areas of expertise, funding, and staff. Yet they are all actively engaged in developing our city as a Livable Community. Indeed, as local volunteer Ann McNichols attests, the quarterly meetings and ongoing collaboration act as a catalyst for action. Agencies are able to "share information and resources to get projects done, and every meeting [conducted by the Aging Futures Partnership] brings somebody else" on board.<sup>xxvi</sup>

### **Binghamton University as a Livable Communities Partner**

One of the greatest contributors to Livable Communities efforts is Binghamton University. Ever since the vision of developing elder-friendly communities emerged, Binghamton University has played a large role in its implementation. Specifically, its contribution comes in the form of its vast store hold of intellectual capital. A number of partnerships have formed between community members and university administrators, students, and faculty in recent years to fuel the Livable Community efforts.

"One defining characteristic of a livable community is the high level of engagement of its residents with one another and with the life of the community itself."<sup>xxvii</sup> According to the AARP and other literature on geriatric issues, older adults require social and intellectual stimulation to counteract cognitive decline.<sup>xxviii</sup> Toward this end, Binghamton University has long invited seniors in the area to engage with a wealth of educational opportunities. Older adults living in Binghamton have free access to materials at the Binghamton University Libraries. They also have the opportunity to audit courses offered to enrolled BU students.

In addition, a special Lyceum program run out of Binghamton University has been developed to offer area seniors "a community for life-long learners." The program consists of a diversity of classes led by retired specialists, community members, and traditional teachers. A number of Binghamton University professors instruct classes themselves. These classes are geared toward seniors and typically cost \$20 or less. In this way, Binghamton University strives to offer its intellectual resource to local seniors in an accessible way.<sup>xxix</sup>

In a less direct way, a number of partnerships have sprung between University faculty and area civic leaders on behalf of older adults in the area. In the College of Community and Public Affairs, Professor Thomas Sinclair is working on the very issue of Livable Communities development. After talks with the Aging Futures Network, Professor Sinclair developed a seminar to conduct a livable communities assessment of Binghamton. The course involves intensive data collection and analysis, including site visits, the use of GIS, developing a census of key services and activities within each neighborhood. Students evaluate each neighborhood-based AARP standards for livability and, finally, issue a report with recommendations for the

future. With his course, Professor Sinclair is working to meet the needs of the Aging Futures Partnership and the broader Livable Communities Coalition.<sup>xxx</sup>

Other sectors of Binghamton University are also working to meet the city's research needs. For a number of years, the Binghamton University Geography Department has utilized its GIS facilities to assist city planning efforts. In addition, the Center for Applied Community Research has been actively involved in a number of projects in the area. These partnerships are key for developing senior-friendly housing and amenities in the future.

Students are also involved in developing elder-friendly communities in Binghamton. Most recently, collaboration between Aging Futures and the Binghamton University School of Social Work has resulted in an innovative initiative. The master's of social work program will launch an initiative to train social workers in elder care issues. A \$75,000 grant by the Hartford Partnership Program for Aging Education will allow students to rotate among various service agencies in Binghamton. "This grant affords both the students and our community with invaluable resources," says Jennifer Marshall of the Social Work Department. "Students will have the opportunity to gain knowledge and skills working with elders...while community agencies will have the added resources of our students who will devote time and energy to build programs, assess needs and address policy needs of the aging population in this region."<sup>xxxi</sup>

### **Looking to a Bright Future**

It is clear that Binghamton University has much to offer the community as it strives to better the lives of older adults. University students, faculty and administrators have a unique asset to share with the neighboring community—and that is its mass of intellectual capital, passion and commitment. We are already offering these resources to various members of the Livable Communities Partnership ranging from Aging Futures to the City administration. As we look to the future, we will only continue these collaborative efforts.

Indeed, as Binghamton comes together to make the area livable, we do so not just for the advantage of our elder residents. Every member of our community will benefit. Downtown businesses that commit to better serving the older customer can expect a new source of customer support and loyalty. Improvements in area walkability promotes exercise, gets people outdoors and reduces dependence on fossil fuel-dependent vehicles. Service agencies that work collaboratively can integrate services to more efficiently meet the needs of the people in our community.

An active, independent older adult population is an asset to our community. The civic participation of retirees means more volunteers and more action taking place in our community. Moreover, Binghamton's ability to retain and attract active baby boomers translates to added tax dollars and a thriving local economy. Many baby boomers are retiring with money to spend and a desire to give back. Attracting and retaining older adults can be a huge asset to Binghamton.

A commitment to Livable Communities also serves another important population in our area – and that is young, educate professionals. It is through initiative such as the Livable

Communities collaboration that we can begin to combat the “Brain Drain.” When we improve amenities, make the city more pedestrian-friendly, boost civic participation, we are developing a city that is attractive to people young and old. The collaboration between the various sectors of our community serves another purpose. It creates an inclusive atmosphere for different people to come together and collaborate on creative pursuits. In this way, we pave the way for young members of the “creative class” to make Binghamton their home.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Catalysts for Intellectual Capital 2020 (CIC 2020) is a student-run economic development think tank working on this very issue. In fact, the name CIC 2020 corresponds to the vision of seeing 20% of Binghamton students stay in Binghamton after they graduate. Working towards this goal involves the complex task of bridging the gap between the University and the City of Binghamton.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

This is not a task that CIC 2020 can accomplish on its own. Enabling professional young people to stay in Binghamton will involve developing opportunities and working towards regional economic revitalization. It is no coincidence that CIC 2020 is not the only group invested in these efforts. Everyone who is invested in our region is working towards these very same goals. All the members of our community want to develop our area as a thriving, livable place for people of every age to live. Yet, making this vision a reality will be no small matter. The success of CIC 2020, as well as its vision for the City of Binghamton, will lie in the collaborative efforts and commitment of all sectors and members of our community.

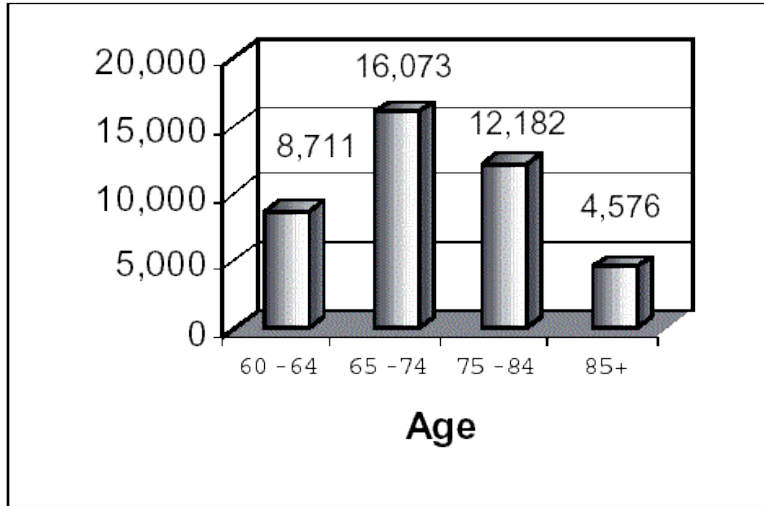
The collaborative efforts of the Livable Communities partnership is significant not only for its practical work; its larger importance lies in what such a partnership represents. The commitment of so many different sectors to the livable conditions shows that we are a community that looks out for one another. Service organizations such as Aging Futures can count on the support of the city administration and our elected officials. We, as a community, are looking beyond the present to oncoming shifts in our population and taking action now to prepare for the future. We are shaping our community based on a vision of what is important to us -- and that is the people, young and old, that make up this great city.

As new partners continually joining the Livable Communities efforts, the future looks bright for the City of Binghamton. With the commitment of Binghamton University matched by the active efforts of our local community, we are on our way to making this bright vision a reality.

## Appendix

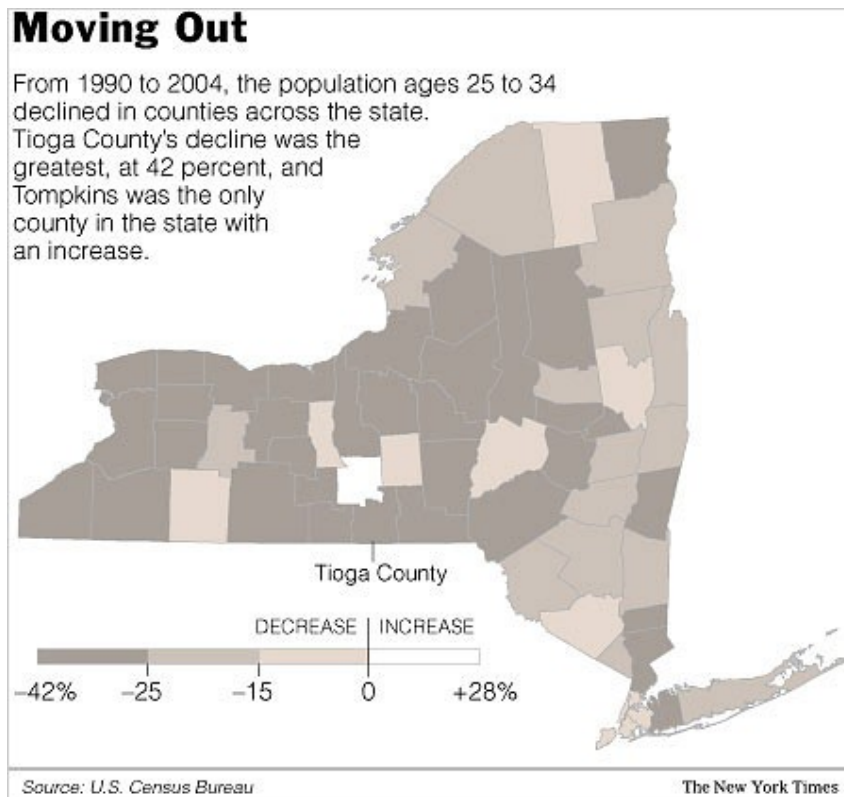
**Figure 1.** A Profile of Older Americans: 2000 Administration on Aging and AARP

### Broome County Elderly Population



Courtesy of: <http://www.gobroomecounty.com/senior/SCPopulationBrochure.php>. 2000.

**Figure 2.** Counties in Upstate New York Losing Younger Age Demographic.



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- <sup>xxxi</sup> InsideBU. "Grant to support elder care social work program." [http://inside.binghamton.edu/news/newspage.cgi?issue=2008feb21&id=2]
- <sup>xxxii</sup> See Richard Florida's *Cities and The Creative Class* for more insight into the issue of developing a city with a thriving creative economy.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> For more information or to get involved, see the Catalysts for Intellectual Capital 2020 website at [http://www.cic2020.org/].