Seniors' transit needs spotlighted

Discussion addresses sometimes-neglected development issue

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NEW YORK — As the number of older Americans climbs, every planning and land use decision must take the different needs of seniors into account, panelists said at a conference on transit options for older adults.

Unspoken was the alternative: Residents will be forced to leave their communities or be isolated from them, or government will be called on to patch together costly solutions.

While transportation planners have already begun to address this, key decision-makers have not, several speakers said.

“We need to get the people making decisions involved,” said James Simpson, the new administrator of the Federal Transit Administration. A former Metropolitan Transportation Authority board member who had failed to see the importance of such meetings, Simpson gently chided current board members and elected officials for their lack of interest.

“You need to make this part of the agenda.”

Acknowledging that by 2020, one-fifth of the work force will be 55 or older, William Wheeler, the MTA’s director of special project development and planning, said:

“We’re going to be challenged to meet the transit needs of seniors, and they’re going to be very diverse. You in local communities have to promote smart development.”

Noting the recent announcement that Donald Trump had joined a partnership to develop a housing complex for home buyers 55 and older in Shrub Oak, Wheeler said, “That’s not exactly one of the most accessible communities.”

“We keep telling people: Concentrate development in those areas that can be serviced by mass transit,” said Larry Salley, Westchester County’s transportation commissioner.

A panelist at yesterday’s conference at NYU’s Wagner Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management, Salley said the less developed nature of northern Westchester made providing bus service there more costly because buses must travel farther with fewer riders.

“In terms of the Bee-Line, in some of these areas, it would be easier to lease people a Lexus for a year than to continue to run some of these services,” he said, refusing to name the routes he had in mind.

Salley said the county would explore using taxi vouchers in the northeastern part of the county to bring home health care workers to their clients.

To entice more senior citizens to use the county’s Bee-Line bus service when ridership is lowest, Salley said Westchester was exploring off-peak pricing. Salley said a Rutgers University doctoral student was researching various possibilities, including free rides, or rides for 25 or 50 cents, between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. for senior citizens.

Through another student’s research, the county is considering ways to make NuRide, the shared ride matching program, safely accessible to AARP members who do not have corporate e-mail accounts.

Salley said he came away from the conference with a few new ideas: “I’m going to be looking at travel training seniors in Louisville, the (volunteer) bus buddy program in Lane, Ore., and the taxi voucher program in San Antonio,” he said.

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