

# **TRANSIT USE VIABILITY AMONG OLDER DRIVERS LOSING DRIVING PRIVILEGES**

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Effective January 1, 2004, Florida Statute 322.18, subsection 5, requires drivers 79 years or older to pass vision tests when renewing their six-year licenses. Several U.S. states have implemented similar mandates in recent years to enhance road safety. This action is one of many that acknowledges the impending boom in population belonging to age brackets in which driving risks are known to increase. Many older members of these populations will no longer be able to drive. Meeting the mobility needs of those for whom driving is no longer an option will be a challenge for Florida and, indeed, the rest of the nation. Determining an appropriate role for public transportation will be part of addressing this challenge.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this project is to study the travel behavior changes of persons (55 years and older) who lose their driving privileges. Researchers will investigate subjects' interest in and ability to use public transit, as well as their actual use of public transit. While it is extremely challenging to determine the magnitude of the role that public transportation might play in meeting the travel needs of elder baby boomers, it is possible for the public transportation research community to begin to explore the nature of the travel demand that may arise and how the industry might position itself to respond. Towards that end, this research effort will explore opportunities and challenges for public transportation in meeting the travel needs of ceased drivers.

## **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The issues surrounding driving cessation and its impact on public transportation, particularly in the future, are quite complex and involve subjects beyond the traditional areas of interest of transportation planners. For example, progress in medical care, improvements in technologies to mitigate the impacts of physical and mental decline, and changes in the social and cultural environment are all likely to influence travel needs of the elderly population in the future.

The baby boomer generation has been characterized as suburban in concentration, and the historic tendency has been for elders to retire in place. This suggests that the next generation of elders will be concentrated in suburban locations where traditional fixed-route public transportation will less likely be in place to provide the quality of service that most of these customers will demand. Fewer of the next-generation of elders will have grown up in locations with good public transportation service or have themselves been regular users of public transportation, both as a result of population migrations to the south and the west, and a general decline in public transportation use in the past several decades. Despite the strong growth of public transportation services in some of the western and southern areas that have experienced rapid population increases, the majority of the future elder population will not be very familiar with public transportation.

Perhaps the most important issue with regard to public transportation demand will be the ability of future seniors to rely upon family, household members, or friends as mobility providers. Indeed, focus groups revealed that the

extent of family and friend support to meet mobility needs strongly influences how successfully elders who discontinue driving adapt. The presence of such support will be critical in determining the extent to which public transportation is desired or necessary. The focus groups addressed household relocation in order to have greater access to public transportation (which would impact transit demand), as an option for both elder drivers and those no longer able to drive. Proximity to public transportation does not appear to be a high-priority strategic consideration in household location.

Currently, transit plays a modest overall role, although it is very important to those who rely on it. Public transportation is not necessarily the logical successor to driving as a means of travel; it certainly is not the substitute of choice. Most often, the conditions that lead one to cease driving result in the person preferring to travel as an auto passenger, providing someone or some entity can provide driving services. While seniors who have ceased driving are frequently reluctant to be burdensome to others, the practical reality remains that few find themselves in a situation where fixed-route transit services are a viable option.

Among the strategies that can support improved mobility for persons no longer able to drive are the following:

- Explore opportunities to provide mobility information through a single group or entity in an urban area, going beyond the current coordination of mobility providers towards a standardized information resource.
- Continue adapting vehicles and facilities to more readily accommodate older travelers.
- Explore and support additional roles for the local transit providers in terms of meeting overall mobility needs of older travelers (e.g., hosting or coordinating ride sharing initiatives).
- Monitor trends in driving cessation and senior mobility as part of local public transportation planning functions.

The study concludes that while there is certainly political will to ensure safety-net services to provide for medical and sustenance trips for those in need, this level of service falls well short of providing quality-of-life enhancing services or increasing the prospect that high quality public transit services can begin to attract a larger share of trips from persons who might otherwise rely on family or friends for mobility. There is a strong desire to find more effective and cost-efficient ways to serve the travel needs of older persons, but there is far less consensus regarding the extent to which public resources and facilities should be applied to attract and absorb the increase of trips occasioned by driving cessation.

## **BENEFITS**

The research will be of interest to Florida-based mobility providers and will benefit public transportation operators by providing a better understanding of the potential size and mobility needs of the market of individuals who may be ceasing and/or have ceased to drive. Public transportation service providers can both shape and market their services to this audience. Dissemination of the findings will enhance the urgency of developing and implementing strategies to accommodate ceasing drivers, either through driver training programs or public transit provision. This is of particular concern to states with significant senior populations.

Overall potential benefits, thus, would include enhanced road safety for all road users and continuance of healthy lifestyles for seniors who, without having to operate vehicles, are able to meet their traveling needs in a state that is known to be and that strives to continue to be welcoming and supportive of its seniors.

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