

# Multigenerational Communities

## In a Nutshell

Multigenerational planning is a holistic city planning approach that designs community infrastructure and assets while taking into consideration how those choices will impact residents across the spectrum of ages. The American Planning Association notes that sometimes certain planning concepts or efforts target specific populations or lifestyles. The reality is that through residential development, zoning, and historic land use patterns, many neighborhoods or suburban communities are designed to cater to a narrow age-segment. In contrast, Multigenerational Communities are places designed to incorporate populations of all age groups, interacting and living together in one community.

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## The “How To”

Increasingly, metropolitan regions are fragmented by communities and areas that are predominantly one particular age group or stage in life. While this clustering phenomenon may not be entirely new, the fragmentation that separates families miles apart negatively impacts economic and social quality of life. For example, often times college-aged students cannot find apartment housing in the communities where they grew up, or young families cannot find affordable starter housing where they prefer to live, or older populations are forced to move miles away from where they've lived for decades, because as they age they cannot [age-in-place](#) in the same town. These are frustrating realities for many individuals who cannot live in the community of their choice or are forced to live long distances from family members. That distance limits the ability for families to help each other out with errands or watching grandchildren or assisting with yard work. Often times residents end up sitting in traffic driving to their relatives' homes to do so, or paying a premium to someone else to fill that need. The distance creates this dilemma.

The American Planning Association has published a [Briefing Paper on Age-Friendly Communities](#). The AARP offers a [toolkit for local government to promote aging-in-place](#), produced by the local government partnership in Atlanta, Georgia and the Community Housing Resource Center.

The core principles include:

- Designating residential land use, zoning, and comprehensive planning to accommodate a wide range of housing products
- Creating communities that allow retired residents and seniors to age-in-place and meet all of their aging needs in the same area
- Creating and fostering local programs that engage the civic participation of all age ranges, with a focus on youth and the elderly, that vests them to the community's future
- Ensuring the community design is safe and accessible to all age populations including children, teenagers, young families, adults, and seniors
- Planning for transportation options that connect all age groups to community businesses and services

In general, planning for multigenerational communities is related to [Universal Design](#), and solutions can be identified to achieve both sets of goals.

# Planning & Zoning

The American Planning Association's briefing on multigenerational communities offers four specific strategies to pursue more age-diverse places to live. Creating multigenerational communities is not a single tool or action by a local government. Rather, it is a holistic approach that plans for the needs of all age ranges and populations in the activities of a municipality or county. Such solutions can include land use and housing policy (i.e. creating a diverse housing stock, maintaining affordable housing), transportation choices, public services, access to health care, daycare, and age-demographic specific businesses. These types of urban planning considerations will ultimately impact a local government's zoning, capital investment strategy, infrastructure design, and a list of public policy decisions.

More specifically, the APA outlines these four principles:

1. Multigenerational planning creates new coalition-building opportunities
2. Civic participation and engagement is fundamental in multigenerational planning
3. Multigenerational planning uses smart growth principles
4. Multigenerational planning applies universal design principles

Those considerations can be blended with the AARP's five components of aging-in-place:

1. Choice
2. Flexibility
3. Entrepreneurship
4. Mixed-Generations
5. Smart Growth

The AARP explains the critical role played by local governments in planning for multigenerational communities. It notes that many communities do not want senior housing and their local codes often prohibit mixed-use zoning, which is critical for seniors to walk to services when they can no longer drive. Furthermore, many of these communities are also resistant to transit options, which not only help seniors age-in-place but provide opportunities to younger populations as well. The AARP's report outlines strategies for cities and counties, such as:

- Diversifying the housing stock
- Allowing [accessory dwelling units](#) (ADUs), such as "mother-in-law apartments" and co-housing options
- Pursuing mixed-use neighborhoods
- Allowing for a mix of housing types within the same areas of the city
- Allowing senior housing facilities in single-family residential districts
- Being open to evaluating higher density residential developments (since density helps affordability and makes senior facility projects profitable)
- Being pro-active in working with NIMBYs - launch public information campaigns and explain benefits of an age diverse community
- Permitting homeowner sublets of bedrooms or spare rooms
- Modifying occupancy permit regulations to allow for "families of choice," or household units of unrelated seniors
- Allowing agency-assisted shared housing
- Engaging the community early and often - make sure a broader strategy is discussed as part of a

community planning process, but that each subsequent development project or regulation reform involves the public in the process

## Dollars & Cents

Planning for a community that is better designed to facilitate aging-in-place is not a one-time, singular decision or project. Instead it is a long-term commitment to a community's public policy decision-making that will be incrementally implemented. It is difficult to estimate the cost to a municipality or county because it is very situational, case-dependent, and based on the actions taken. However, some decisions will simply require staff time (allowing "grandma" apartments added to second-floor of detached backyard garages) and others will be making modifications to capital infrastructure projects (sidewalks designed for baby strollers and wheelchair accessibility). However, the cost-benefits and positive economic impacts have been documented. The [American Planning Association](#) has published some research on the economic benefits to multigenerational communities.

## Measuring Success

For multigenerational communities, one of the easiest metrics to evaluate your local community is a [population pyramid](#). This graphical depiction essentially shows standardized age breakdowns across a population. A simple comparison between a local municipality or county's population pyramid against a benchmark, such as a city to its home county, or a local government to its home metropolitan region and/or home state, or of course as compared to the U.S. pyramid nationally, will provide your local community a sense of how closely your age distribution matches these benchmarks. If your local community is considerably younger, older, or concentrated in one age grouping, then an analysis of your policies may be warranted. However, as a local government implements actions aimed at increasing the multigenerational distribution of their community, progress can be tracked through these comparisons. Or more simply, a snapshot evaluation can be made by comparing median age of the population to these same jurisdictions. One resource for such population information is the [U.S. Census Bureau](#), particularly their Populations Projections database.

On a more annual and project-driven basis, a community can evaluate whether new investments (whether public or private) are contributing to a multigenerational area. The first step would be identifying which age-segment your community predominantly appeals to now. Then simply track whether new investment in the community targets an under-represented population. If your community is primarily mid-career families, in the last year did your municipality approve another single-family detached subdivision with starting prices around \$200,000? Or were any apartment complexes marketed at nearby college students or senior-specific housing facilities approved as well? If you community only receives permit applications (or only approves) the same kinds of development you already have, then more complex metrics such as a population pyramid will never yield a more age diverse community.

## Discover More

One element of multigenerational communities is multigenerational living itself - that means more than one adult generation within the same family living together under the same roof. The AARP provides information

on the [sizable increase in these types of households](#) as well as topics related to this style of living.

Also be sure to review the One STL tool on [Universal Design](#), which works in a complementary fashion with building a multigenerational community, although each tool has its own independent goals.