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The Dynamics of Aging and Our Communities

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Mission Statement

CCQ is an electronic and print public policy quarterly dedicated to looking at the aging segment of our society and region as it redefines itself and intersects with a wide cross section of demographic, social, cultural and economic features of society. In this light, we will consider subjects such as city and town planning, environmental advocacy, economic development, housing, work force, education, mobility, regionalism, governance, marketing, recreation, health care, social services, creativity, demographics, emerging technologies and the roles of nonprofit organizations. Our audience is public and private decision makers and all others seeking to understand a changing society. We will offer concise, thoughtful and interesting articles. Comments, including letters to the editor and recommendations from our readers, are welcome.

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Lights! Camera! Action! – Part Three

Several years ago, Albany Guardian Society decided that aging in place would be our principal project. Since that time, we have offered programs that have helped people understand what’s important if they or a loved one wish to age in place. We have collaborated with the New York State Office for the Aging and a number of local groups to produce educational events on related topics such as empowering communities and falls prevention.

At first glance these topics may not seem related to our central theme of aging in place, but they are. A safe home is a home that you can live in for a long time. It isn’t always obvious, but a safe home lets you maintain your independence and allows you to age in place. An empowered community also helps all of us. People who promote empowered communities understand that universal design and visitability don’t end at the exterior walls of a house. A community with good sidewalks and curb cuts is a community that benefits people of all ages and abilities.

In 2002 and again in 2007, Albany Guardian Society partnered with WMHT Public Television to produce “It’s An Age Thing!” and “It’s An Age Thing: Our Communities.” These 13-part series were well-received by the public and are still occasionally aired on some public stations. In mid-2010, John Robinson from WCNY Public Television in Syracuse suggested that Albany Guardian Society consider a project with WCNY. John was previously at WMHT where he co-produced a television show titled “Get Off Your Knees: The John Robinson Story.” Both the show and its companion book by the same name describe how John, a person with disabilities, has worked hard to live a life most of us take for granted. John regularly experiences the challenges of a world that is not always friendly to people with mobility difficulties. He understands first-hand why having an environment that “works” for you is a lot better than an environment that “fights” you each step of the way.

When John asked us to consider partnering with WCNY, I explained that we were focusing on aging in place. John convinced us that a television show on universal design and housing for a lifetime is exactly what we are focused on. He reminded us that successful aging in place is a function of how well a person’s home and community help the person exercise independence on a daily basis. John was a persuasive advocate, and last fall we agreed to proceed with the television show.

Earlier this year, we began taping a four-part television series on universal design and housing for a lifetime. We don’t have a title yet, but I can tell you the episodes will be very informative and helpful to viewers who want to understand more about universal design. Local architect Dave Sadowsky is featured in a number of segments. Dave has designed many universal design homes in the Capital District and understands the practical application of universal design concepts as a house evolves from a plan on paper into a real structure. We have also included Esther Greenhouse from Ithaca, New York. Esther is an expert on universal design and she teaches the National Association of
Home Builders’ Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist (CAPS) program. She provides a great overview of universal design and the practicality of it as she reminds us why each of us should be thinking about universal design as we build or remodel our homes.

Our series will also allow viewers to hear Jordana Maisel from the University of Buffalo’s IDeA Center at its School of Architecture. Jordana offers terrific insight into universal design at both the individual and the community levels. Jordana co-wrote AARP’s book on visitability and the work she and her colleagues are undertaking at the IDeA center will continue to expand our understanding of the built environment and what it means to people of all ages and abilities as they make an effort to live as independently as possible.

We don’t have a firm air date, but we will do our best to let you know when you’ll be able to watch this series. In the meantime, pick up a copy of “Get Off Your Knees: The John Robinson Story.” You’ll come away with great admiration for this gentleman as he inspires us to strive for homes and workplaces that can help all of us live better and more productive lives.

Rick Iannello  
Executive Director  
Albany Guardian Society
Daniel Kemmis, former Mayor of Missoula, Montana, wrote an excellent book entitled *The Good City and the Good Life: Renewing the Sense of Community*. When he wrote about children, Kemmis said, “Only a healthy, well-functioning, well-integrated city can hope to summon the resources to become what it should or would like to be for its children.” He went on to say, “Having spent so many decades thinking of cities in fragmented, bureaucratic terms, we do not readily ask how the emerging wholeness of the city, or the realization of the city’s potential, might help in the pursuit of solutions to particular problems.”

I thought of Daniel Kemmis when I received Vera Prosper’s article on creating livable communities. Her article is an outgrowth and summary of a comprehensive effort led by the New York State Office for the Aging (NYSOFA) to improve livability in New York State. It started with legislation I worked on for NYS Assemblyman Steven Englebright a few years ago. The legislation sought to foster “age integrated communities.” At the time, the Assemblyman was thinking about a strip mall on Long Island in his legislative district and a vision he had to change the zoning for the mall property in order to permit development of apartments above the stores. He was chairing the Assembly Aging Committee and felt this placement of apartments would be attractive to seniors who could live near stores and an active place accessible by foot.

Today, when we think about supporting aging in place with Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities as we have in Albany and creating “children zones” to meet the needs of children and their families as was done in Harlem, NYSOFA is taking a broad view that could be called “living in place” where there are optimum conditions for people of all ages, desires, and expectations. As you read Prosper’s article, you will see that NYSOFA focused on the wholeness or larger context of communities and not just its tasks at hand, which, for NYSOFA, are meeting the needs of the growing aging population. Simply stated, isn’t a community that serves all its residents and visitors well and in all ways is a special place likely to be the best place for seniors to live?

In its own way, CCQ has been a journal about living in place. It features an organization in each issue, such as the Huyck Preserve in this issue, that is a treasure making our “place” so special and good as a place to live. Many of these treasures not only provide opportunities for beneficial enjoyment by seniors, they also depend on seniors as volunteers.

You can see from Ed Neary’s article on the Colonie Senior Service Centers that service models for seniors can and should be organized around the idea of seniors being “fully involved and important members of their community.” To Ed and others associated with the Colonie Senior Service Centers, hearty congratulations on your thirtieth anniversary.

If you are like me, the Red Cross primarily comes to mind when it is responding to great disasters (hurricanes, tsunamis, famine, etc.) around the world. Gary Striar recently reminded me, and he reminds you in this article about the Red Cross “in our backyard,” how the Red Cross assists in 200
disasters each year within our community. Our Red Cross is another reason why living in place in our region is desirable.

Our community is fortunate to have a literary tradition that includes Herman Melville and William Kennedy, two of America’s greatest writers, as well as having the Writer’s Institute at UAlbany. CCQ’s regular feature of having a locally written personal essay is a way of highlighting the fact that our community is fortunate to have many outstanding fiction and nonfiction writers. This issue of CCQ introduces writer Susan Hogan to our pages with her powerful essay, “An Introduction to Mourning.”

Finally, CCQ’s Guest Column regularly presents an outstanding leader in our livable community who shares his or her thoughts. In this issue, that leader is Thomas DiNapoli, the New York State Comptroller. The State Comptroller not only oversees the financial management of state government, but has the special role of managing the state’s pension fund. It is the pension fund that is his subject for us.

So, as you read this issue of CCQ, I hope you recognize our overarching purpose of sharing information about why living in place in our region is so good for everyone.

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The Huyck Preserve and Biological Research Station: Connecting People to Nature Through Education, Recreation, Conservation, and Research

By Chad Jemison

Nestled in the historic hilltown of Rensselaerville in southwest Albany County, the Edmund Niles Huyck Preserve protects over 2,000 acres that include waterfalls, a lake, pond, streams, and diverse forest habitats. Since 1931, the Preserve has worked to protect Lake Myosotis and the headwaters of the Ten Mile Creek watershed. Over its eighty year history, the Preserve has evolved and grown, but its role of connecting people to nature through education, recreation, conservation, and biological research remains firmly intact.

The Huyck Preserve is a secret gem that many lifelong residents of the region have never heard of. With over eleven miles of hiking trails, a 100-foot cascading waterfall, and high-quality natural history public programs throughout the year, all open to the public, this membership-supported organization is convenient to the Capital Region. While sections of the Preserve feel like they are deep in the wild, there are many options for either easy strolls with impressive water-side views or full-day hiking adventures. Rensselaerville, a historic hamlet on both the State and National Registers of Historic Places, is a straight shot south on either Delaware Avenue or Route 85, twenty-eight miles from Albany at the end of Route 85.

Education

The Preserve’s educational programs are meant to “increase the general and scientific knowledge and love of nature” through innovative, field-based educational programs for students, teachers, and lifelong learners. The Preserve strives to achieve excellence in its education programs by bringing in specialists who lead experiences on the Preserve that provide the public with appreciation, awe, and understanding of how the natural world functions.

Just a few of the Huyck Preserve’s educational activities include naturalist walks on birds, ferns, wildflowers, and mushrooms. This year, the Preserve will offer a course on how to keep a nature journal. On Thursday nights throughout the summer, there is a free lecture series at the research campus at Lincoln Pond (located one mile outside of the hamlet at 284 Pond Hill Road).
Recreation
The Preserve’s recreational programs are designed to increase the general knowledge and love of nature; promote healthy outdoor activities among its members and the general public; and continue the close relationship between the Preserve and the local community by providing access to the Preserve and allowing enjoyment of the natural beauty of Lake Myosotis, the Ten Mile Creek, and the majestic Rensselaerville Falls. The Huyck Preserve contains a network of over seven miles of trails, which pass through a variety of habitats, including old-growth hemlock forest, freshwater wetland, shrub swamps, second-growth hardwood forest, and pine plantations.

The Rensselaerville Falls and Lake Myosotis Trail begin near the Visitor Center at the edge of the historic village of Rensselaerville. The trail climbs over, along, and past the breathtaking Rensselaerville Falls and can be followed to the shores of Lake Myosotis. Along the way, hikers pass the ruins of the Huyck Felt Mill near the bottom of the falls just over the lower bridge. The Lake Myosotis Trail continues through northern hardwood forests and wetlands rich with wildlife and wildflowers.

The Lincoln Pond Trail begins near the Eldridge Research Station at the south end of Lincoln Pond and makes a loop around the pond, passing through shadowy hemlock forests and wetlands in which abundant beaver activity is evident. Recently, beaver have flooded the back of the trail leaving it, at this time, partially impassible. Red squirrels, fishers and eastern newts, and a variety of birdlife including warblers, waterfowl, and bald eagles, are frequently seen in and around the pond.

The Wheeler-Watson trail begins near the Eldridge Research Station and meanders through second-growth hardwood forest and thickets in which the Preserve’s rich human history can be observed in old apple trees, stone walls, and in the historic Wheeler-Watson cemetery where many of the early settlers of Rensselaerville found their resting place. The trail ends at the Race Track where Sunday horse races were once held.

The newest addition to the Preserve’s trail system is the Partridge Path, which traverses the northern 1,200 acres and includes large tracts of mature sugar maple forest, small wetlands, and more. Soon the Partridge Path will connect to the famous Long Path, which stretches from the Helderberg Escarpment to the George Washington Bridge.
Conservation

In order to provide an undisturbed, undeveloped area for scientific research, environmental education, and recreation, a primary purpose of the Preserve is to protect the Ten-Mile Creek watershed. The 2,000 acres of the Preserve stretch between New York State’s Rensselaerville State Forest and Partridge Run Wildlife Management Area, forming part of an extensive conservation corridor in southwestern Albany County. The Preserve strives to protect natural processes through monitoring ecological communities and taking steps to minimize, if not eliminate, threats to those communities wherever possible. Our conservation activities are consistent with the Land Trust Alliance Standards and Practices.

Conservation is critical for protecting the Preserve’s research, educational, and recreational programs as well as the surrounding landscape and communities. Conservation efforts often lead to enhanced property values, contribute to rural landscape protection, provide access to natural areas, and protect areas that can serve as outdoor classrooms for education programs. The emphasis on conservation and the use of volunteers in stewardship continues to have a positive impact.

The Preserve recognizes that proper stewardship of its diverse ecosystems requires a variety of management strategies, including both passive and active management. For example, some wetland areas are passively managed for research, watershed protection, and light recreation (such as hiking and bird watching), while other areas may be more actively managed, like continuing to mow hay fields in order to maintain habitat diversity. Ecological restoration, invasive species control, and the protection of rare species, ecological communities, water quality, and cultural resources are all a part of our work as stewards.

Research

The Huyck Preserve supports research into behavior, ecology, evolution, natural history, and other areas in the natural sciences in order to increase the understanding of how natural areas work. The Huyck Preserve’s biological field station facilitates meaningful discovery in the natural sciences and serves as a training ground for field research. Monitoring and conservation-focused research contribute to a fuller understanding of ecosystem processes and environmental change through published research, conferences, and other means of dissemination. In addition to encouraging investigator-driven, independent study, the Preserve also fosters targeted research that contributes to the stewardship and educational missions.
The Huyck Preserve and Biological Research Station has many outstanding natural features and it has earned an excellent reputation among naturalists and outdoor enthusiasts. Like other nature preserves in the region, it is a somewhat disconnected assembly of parcels with different land-use histories, including plantations, former old fields, natural flows, and artificial impoundments. However, due to its rural setting and a relatively high level of protection, much of the Preserve is moving toward more pristine natural conditions, with a rich avifauna (birds), a diverse flora, and thriving populations of some native mammals, amphibians, and invertebrates. Its proximity to more urbanized areas allows for useful contrasts of many phenomena, such as air and water quality or plant and animal communities.

What sets the Huyck Preserve apart from the many other parks and nature preserves nearby (including more than 100 within a 50-mile radius, without venturing into the Adirondack or Catskill Parks) is its tradition of scientific research. Leading research scientists were consulted prior to and during its establishment and the research station has been its core facility from the beginning. Its mission has been to foster and support field study at high academic levels. The subsequent flows of scientists and their accomplishments stand in tribute to that vision. Considering the Preserve’s relatively small size, its modest levels of support, and its relatively unsophisticated research infrastructure, its history and reputation as a productive field station are quite remarkable.

Modern science (early nineteenth century and onward) has been driven by the diligence and creativity of individual investigators. Research institutions of all varieties recognize this and the global research and development community still looks to the U.S. and European models of investigator-driven science. The Huyck Preserve is no exception. It sets few bounds on the topics or approaches of visiting investigators, and it offers them a peaceful and secure working environment.

Information on visiting and upcoming programs at the Preserve can be found at www.huyckpreserve.org. You are always welcome to “Hike the Huyck” and become part of the community that cherishes this special and unique preserve in the Capital Region.
Creating Livable Communities

By Vera Prosper, Ph.D.

Livable communities
All across the country there is a growing call among residents, organizations, professional disciplines, and governments to improve the “livability” of our cities, towns, villages, and neighborhoods. But, what exactly is a livable community?

“One of New York State’s efforts to improve livability is Livable New York, a collaborative education and technical assistance initiative involving state and local government agencies, residents, professionals from multiple disciplines, and community leaders.”

There is not a general consensus on one definition. However, a scan of this national movement reveals that numerous tangible and intangible elements contribute to a community’s level of livability. Residents and other community members find tangible elements easy to see, identify, and measure. Some examples include:

*Tangible Elements—visible, easily measured*

- Choices in housing options
- Universally designed and accessible homes, buildings, public spaces, and communication venues
- Walkable communities and complete streets
- Accessible, affordable transportation
- Choices in mobility options
- Sustainable homes and communities—using green building, energy-efficiency, and smart growth strategies
- Healthy living environments—home, workplace, public spaces
- Flexible zoning and land-use policies—to allow the benefits of multiple and innovative solutions to community issues
- Access to appropriate and affordable basic necessities—such as healthy food, socialization opportunities, amenities, supportive services, preventative health services, medical care
- Safe neighborhoods
- Opportunities for active engagement in community life and civic activities by residents of all ages, all cultures, and all abilities
- Good educational opportunities
- Meaningful volunteer and paid work opportunities for all residents
Intangible elements are more difficult to define; nevertheless, community evaluations show that residents definitely know when they are missing. These are aspects that have a remarkable influence on the quality of our living environments and on our daily lives—and are the subject of increasing desire by residents in communities across the country. Some examples include:

**Intangible Elements—less concretely visible, harder to define**

- **Sense of Community:** If a sense of community exists, members feel a shared feeling of belonging, a feeling of interconnectedness among community members; there is a belief that members matter to one another and to the larger group; there is a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through a commitment to act together as a community.¹

- **Community Empowerment:** Community members (all age groups, ability groups, household types, and cultural and ethnic groups) feel empowered when they have avenues for actively engaging in civic opportunities and community activities; when their ability to participate in community planning and decision-making is sought and promoted; and when they feel a sense of personal control over decisions about their daily lives.

- **Social Capital:** A community’s social capital is all its people, the network of social relationships that tie them together, and the value of these relationships for achieving mutual goals. Economic, social, and community-building benefits are maximized when a community fully capitalizes upon the creativity, skills, knowledge, and resources inherent in its social capital when defining and resolving crucial community issues.²

- **Community Character:** Community character has been described as a combination of traits and values, such as aesthetic and visual resources; existing patterns of land use, population settlement, and recreation and open spaces; historic, heritage, or archeological resources; and level of health and safety. A community that is favorably recognized for its character is one in which the combination of these traits and values reflects a good quality of life.³

While livability features are many and varied, a definitional characteristic that is common to all these elements is their significant impact on individual residents’ quality of life and on the overall community’s well-being. However, the subjective nature of “quality of life” and “well-being” adds to the imprecision of a definition for livability; and, in addition, as each municipality’s resident profile and community circumstances are unique, the responses of community members vary when asked to prioritize livability aspects.
Livable New York

One of New York State’s efforts to improve livability is Livable New York, a collaborative education and technical assistance initiative involving state and local government agencies, residents, professionals from multiple disciplines, and community leaders. The intent of this effort—which is to help municipalities take locally determined steps to improve the livability of their communities—reflects a recognition of the unique character of individual communities. According to Greg Olsen, Acting Director of the New York State Office for the Aging, which is Livable New York’s lead agency, “Achieving the sustainability goals of this initiative relies upon a community measuring its own members’ perceptions of their community’s livability, and taking local planning and development steps in direct response to those perceptions.”

The products and activities developed under the Livable New York initiative focus on various tangible areas of community life: housing, universal design, development, planning, zoning, green building, energy alternatives, mobility, and transportation. However, as noted by Acting Director Olsen, “The principles that frame how a community carries out its planning and development efforts within those focus areas have a major impact on advancing the intangible elements of community livability.”

For individuals, families, and the overall community, the quality-of-life and well-being benefits of both intangible and tangible aspects are strongly underscored in two of Livable New York’s major products, the Livable New York Resource Manual, which is a technical assistance planning and development guide for community members, and the Livable New York Advisory Workgroup Report, which is a set

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Principles Underpinning 
Livable New York

- Planning is **future-oriented**, based on projected demographic, social, public policy, and global changes—to assure that the definition of issues and the design of solutions accurately reflect the continuing evolution of a community’s resident profile and the community’s circumstances.

- An **inclusive, collaborative approach** is used in planning and when implementing activities—to take maximum advantage of the expertise, resources, creativity, and diverse perspectives residing within a community’s multiple professions, disciplines, and citizen groups.

- A **cross-community approach** is used when defining issues and identifying solutions—which includes all ages, all cultures, and all abilities—in order to fully capitalize on the capacities and innovative ideas inherent in diversity.

- **Broad resident participation** is ensured—in order to gain the benefits derived from greater community engagement and empowerment, to strengthen a “sense of community,” and to help stabilize a community’s population base.

- Actions and activities stem from **community-driven planning and development**—for greater assurance that a community’s efforts truly reflect the expressed needs, preferences, and expectations of its members.
of recommendations intended to facilitate the ability of communities to overcome challenges that communities can encounter when planning and implementing projects and activities. Both products can be viewed at www.aging.ny.gov.

The livable communities movement is growing . . . but is it sustainable?
A key building block of livable communities is sustainability—a term increasingly used across sectors to emphasize attention on the world we are leaving for our children and grandchildren. Sustainability focuses on planning, resource-use, design, and development policies and strategies that meet today’s needs, but do so without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The movement also relies upon using a sustainable planning, design, and development approach that integrates the principles underpinning livability—and maintaining those principles over time as community issues emerge.

Is there evidence that this nationwide livability movement will be sustained? Is it infatuation with this latest buzz word whose trendy time is peaking, or does it signal a sea change in norms across the professions and in expectations among the citizenry? Both the forces driving this movement and the many actions being taken under the banner of livability suggest not a fad, but a sustainable basis for a long-term shift in thinking and behavior.

Forces impelling the movement: All communities are experiencing the effects of crucial “change drivers” that have come together to make the livable communities movement both timely and practical as a more effective planning, design, and development strategy and as a means for choosing solutions that bring the community into better alignment with ever-evolving issues and residents’ expectations.

One critical force is the impact of demographic and social trends that are transforming the portrait of New York’s neighborhood populations and, as a result, the needs and preferences of community members. These trends include the aging of the State’s population, increasing longevity, growth in the number of residents of all ages with all types of disabilities, dramatic growth in our population’s ethnic and cultural diversity, robust patterns of foreign immigration and domestic migration, and significant increases in the number and types of non-traditional households.

Directly related to the impact of these demographic and social trends are major shifts in federal and state public policies, which have had an impact on how and where we house our residents, how we deliver services, and how we address environmental issues. Long-term care and housing policies have promoted the ability of all residents—regardless of age, ability, health, or situation—to live in conventional housing options, to be integrated within residential neighborhoods, and to access in-home and community-based services and care. Development policies have spurred a growing focus on green building, energy alternatives, resource-conservation, and smart growth principles.
In the face of these demographic, social, and policy changes, communities are recognizing the need to re-define issues and consider a variety of solutions in order to most appropriately meet community needs, as well as to involve the overall community itself in taking these steps.

**Actions internalizing the movement’s principles:** Several examples can illustrate the variety in types of projects and shifts in thinking that are increasingly occurring across the country under the rubric of livability—and which are inexorably strengthening the sustainable nature of this movement:

- **Combined Heat and Power (CHP):** The New York State Energy Research and Development Authority describes the Fonda-Fultonville Central School District, in which the entire K-12 school is operating off the utility grid, producing its own electricity and recycling the heat for hot water and cooling through the system’s absorption process. This CHP system has resulted in higher fuel efficiency and lower operational costs for the school, and its independent, on-site power generation allows the school to be used as a place of refuge during community emergencies.4

- **Complete Streets:** The La Jolla neighborhood of San Diego illustrates the social and economic benefits of a livability design, where, following new roadwork to implement complete street policies, La Jolla Boulevard turned from a previously little-used strip of shops into a now safe, vibrant boulevard alive with people. Despite the recent economic meltdown, the boulevard is outperforming on every factor, from numbers of bicyclists, pedestrians, and shoppers to number of smiles.5

- **Containing Urban Sprawl:** Trowbridge, Gurka, and O’Connor’s research analysis of Emergency Medical Service (EMS) response times supports the growing move to contain sprawl. Their findings show that, in sprawling areas, the probability of a delayed ambulance arrival for daytime crashes (in dry conditions and without construction) was 69 per cent compared with 31 per cent in areas with prominent smart-growth characteristics.6

- **Choices in Housing:** The original Grandfamilies House, built in Boston in 1998, illustrates the value of this model for both the community and the resident grandparents who have assumed custodial responsibility for their grandchildren. The onetime nursing home, shuttered for twenty years, was a neighborhood eyesore before it opened as the GrandFamilies House. Now, it is a community asset; and its aim is to be a housing community, not just a housing complex.7

- **Resident Involvement:** In their research, Sommer, Learey, Summit, and Tirrell report that, despite an all-time increase in citizen and business support for urban forestry (neighborhood trees), programs to plant trees have declined, tree maintenance has decreased, and death of planted trees has increased. They compared neighborhoods in which the municipality or a professional landscaper planted the trees (low resident involvement) with neighborhoods in which the neighborhood’s residents planted the trees (high resident involvement). Their findings show that, compared with “low involvement” residents, “high involvement” residents
were significantly more satisfied with the way the trees had been initially staked and where the trees were located; in addition, the quality of on-going tree maintenance was better in those neighborhoods, and the “high involvement” residents gave the street/neighborhood’s improvement (due to the trees) and the neighborhood’s friendliness a higher rating than did the residents in neighborhoods in which the trees were professionally planted without resident involvement. The researchers’ findings were consistent with other research documenting the benefits of active user involvement in environmental change (for example, user-designed parks, building renovation, neighborhood design, and community gardens).

The growing interest in community livability reflects the significant push of all these trends, policies, and actions, which, together with the growing number of federal and state government “livable community” laws, policy guidelines, grant initiatives, and award programs, strongly heighten the sustainable nature of the livable communities movement.

References:


Vera Prosper, Ph.D., is employed by the New York State Office for the Aging and lectures at the University at Albany.
Innovative Service Model Responds to Aging Population

By Edward Neary

The older I get the more I realize that most of the innovations I get excited about already exist—they just have new packaging!

As our baby boomer generation reaches senior status, it is anticipated that the senior population nationally will double over the next thirty years. In the 2000 Census, Colonie’s seniors made up 20.7 percent of the Town’s population. We believe the 2010 census will show continued growth, especially accelerating in the 75+ and 85+ cohorts, making it critical that our efforts go toward helping our community build a livable community for all, including seniors.

It is essential that existing senior service organizations, and the communities we serve, develop a way to ensure that we continue to be (or become) senior-friendly, livable communities. While programs and services provided by senior service organizations are an important and integral component, it makes sense that the entire community, including government, business, school, neighborhood, and faith-based groups, participate in this effort because most seniors and baby boomers are still fully involved and important members of the community. This changes the long held belief that one role of a community is to “care” for its elders.

This is the model that Colonie Senior Service Centers works hard to develop, bringing groups to the table that have innovative and practical ideas and programs to provide exceptional services to seniors and their families that complement existing offerings. There are many good ideas already in practice. Colonie Senior Service Centers finds ways to integrate them into our existing services to provide a seamless network of resources for older adults. There are many successful models out there such as Beacon Hill Village, Seniorsfirst Community and Services, and others.

"It is essential that existing senior service organizations, and the communities we serve, develop a way to ensure that we continue to be (or become) senior-friendly, livable communities."

Today, our model works well for Colonie. Colonie Senior Service Centers was incorporated in 1981 by community leaders to provide transportation. They realized that the most cost-effective way to provide transportation services to seniors in Colonie was to create a nonprofit organization. Wages and benefits for retired senior drivers would be lower and a good nonprofit could do a better job garnering financial support from business and community. Although Colonie Senior Service Centers began as an organization entirely funded by the Town, over time we have developed the capability to be more self-sufficient. This is crucial to the continued progress of the organization, as it has become clear over the years that public funding will not increase even though the demand continues to grow.
Today, transportation remains a key to senior independence and, currently, Colonie Senior Services has been able to meet the growing demand. Senior transportation, like transportation for the disabled, is often specialized. Public transportation focuses on mass transit and the majority of public funding goes toward this effort. Senior organizations then have to figure out how to meet the growing demand and cost for seniors not on main routes served by public transportation. More and more communities are embracing the ITN model, trading in vehicles in exchange for lifetime rides. Others are recruiting volunteers. Churches take care of their own, which is the good neighbor approach. We have a multifaceted approach utilizing traditional van service, escort wagons, grocery store buses, “college-type” ride boards, Umbrella handymen, and we are working with Community Caregivers to add another piece to the puzzle.

“The leading difference between the present senior population and the preceding generation was the desire to age in place in the community where they had spent most of their lives, and snowbirds were becoming far fewer.”

Recently we have pivoted to work with older drivers to help them stay on the road longer and safer simply because of the number of older drivers on the road today and how exponentially they will grow over the next decades. The Driver Fitness Centers are a resource center, a place to evaluate skills and the appropriateness of the driver’s vehicle. They also provide training classes, peer counseling, and a place where transportation alternatives can be discussed. This is a low cost, high impact program that in a short period of time has been replicated in ten communities in Albany County. A key component has been the willingness of law enforcement to attend our seminars on older driver issues. Colonie Senior Service Centers has also worked with the Center for Disability Services and CDTA to enhance training for our drivers, resulting in safer transportation for individuals utilizing our services and setting the stage for when United We Ride, a transportation resource coordination program, becomes a reality.
In the thirty years since Colonie Senior Service Centers opened its doors, by identifying and responding to the needs of our senior population, creative approaches in Transportation Services have followed in Senior Dining; Health and Recreation; Bright Horizons Day Program; two independent living facilities, Sheehy Manor and the Beltrone Living Center; and the Umbrella of Colonie home maintenance program. Today, as we think about the future needs of Colonie, we are focused on gap-filling and add-on services to help seniors age in place.

"After thirty years and all of this effort, we believe we are prepared to meet the needs of the future."

In 2003, Colonie began development of a Comprehensive Plan for the Town. One of the most active groups in forming the plan were senior citizens and groups advocating for the them such as Senior Clubs, the Senior Resources Department, and Colonie Senior Service Centers. This input helped the Town recognize the impact this growing senior segment of the population would have in the future. The leading difference between the present senior population and the preceding generation was the desire to age in place in the community where they had spent most of their lives, and snowbirds were becoming far fewer. Seniors staying near their home-base and continuing to work, at least part-time, was becoming the norm. This brought to bear concerns regarding access to transportation, pedestrian friendly walkways, and other quality of life issues. One result was the Land Use Law of 2007, which incorporated solutions to many of the concerns expressed by seniors.

Also stemming from discussions surrounding the Comprehensive Plan, was the development of the Colonie Senior Network, a group that includes representatives of municipal providers such as Police, EMS, Fire, the Senior Resources Department, schools, faith-based groups, nonprofit service providers like Colonie Senior Service Centers, and the business community. Issues and concerns of seniors are discussed by the group and solutions sought. Often one member can help fill a gap for another provider; communication is the key, knowing what each member can provide. Having information and awareness of the helping services that are already available in the community eliminates the need to “create” a new program because the solution already exists. The next step is simply to connect those in need with the service. Hardly innovative, but definitely intelligent!

After thirty years and all of this effort, we believe we are prepared to meet the needs of the future. The model enables us to respond effectively to changing needs so we can continue to create a livable community for our seniors, soon to be seniors, and future seniors. We would like to believe in our powers of innovation, but remind ourselves that we have seen these ideas before—just in different packages. 

Edward Neary is Executive Director of Colonie Senior Service Centers, Inc.
The Red Cross in Our Backyard

By Gary Striar

For one hundred years, the Red Cross has been providing help and hope to residents of the Capital Region. The seeds of the present-day American Red Cross of Northeastern New York (ARCNENY) were sown in 1910, when the Albany Area Chapter was chartered by the national Red Cross. Yet, the Red Cross had been active as a volunteer organization in the greater Capital Region since 1882.

The Red Cross is involved with older Capital District residents in many ways. We have a number of programs, described below, that benefit seniors. Also, many of our volunteers are seniors.

ARCNENY serves the people of Albany, Schenectady, Rensselaer, Fulton, Montgomery, Columbia, Greene, and Schoharie Counties and the Town of Waterford in Saratoga County. We also lead a five-chapter, 17-county region stretching from Plattsburgh to Poughkeepsie. We are only able to fulfill our mission through the efforts of a small number of staff and more than 1,500 volunteers.

Nationally, we have 33,000 paid staff and 600,000 volunteers. That’s 19 volunteers for every paid staff person. This explains why the Red Cross is often called America’s leading volunteer organization.

Locally, we respond each year to nearly 200 disasters such as home or apartment fires. We respond to these disasters 24-hours a day, seven days per week. When these fires happen, firemen put out the fire and leave. It is the Red Cross that is there immediately to take care of the people—providing a place to sleep, food to eat, clothing, blankets to keep them warm, and friendly faces for support. Of course, we also have to always be ready to respond to big disasters like ice storms and floods; but fortunately they happen less frequently.

“In addition to the many seniors for whom we provide care, we are also grateful to the seniors themselves who give back to our organization.”

Each year, we train over 30,000 people to save lives with first aid, CPR, babysitting, water safety, and more. We also train thousands of people of all ages in emergency preparedness through our Be Red Cross Ready program. We have provided these one hour preparedness sessions to senior groups throughout the Capital District free of charge.

The Red Cross collects over 50,000 units of blood locally each year, virtually all of which are used by area hospitals. We also have many services for members of the military and their families.
The Red Cross has a number of programs for seniors from providing seasonal weather preparedness tips to telephone calls to seniors who live alone. Our services can touch the lives of all seniors whether they live alone, reside with family, or have moved to a professional care setting.

As we grow older, we need more frequent health care and one-on-one attention. One option seniors can turn to is our Telephone Reassurance Program. Under this program, volunteers make telephone calls to the elderly to provide them with regular outside contact. The telephone reassurance caller is a friendly voice who cares, is there to listen, and can provide desperately needed companionship.

Our Family Care-Giving program is designed to help families who have taken on the challenges of caring for a loved one at home. The program consists of nine, one-hour modules including home safety, general caregiving skills, positioning and helping a loved one move, personal care, healthy eating, legal and financial issues, and caring for a loved one with Alzheimer’s disease, dementia or HIV/AIDS.

The New York State Office for the Aging has contracted with the American Red Cross to administer a Long Term Care Ombudsman Program in Albany, Schenectady, Montgomery, and Washington Counties. “Ombudsman” is a Swedish term meaning “citizen representative” or “one who speaks on behalf of others.” The program is dedicated to protecting people who live in long term care facilities such as nursing homes and adult care facilities.

Mandated under the Older Americans Act of 1975, the ombudsman works on behalf of a resident of a nursing home or adult care facility to resolve complaints. In many cases, these residents have little or no contact with the outside world and feel that they lack control over the quality of their own lives. They may need help addressing problems because they are unaware of their rights or what the facility is required to do on their behalf or are unable to independently work through the complexities of a complaint process. Often, the resident just needs someone to listen and care while advocating for an improvement.

Our ombudsmen are volunteers who make a commitment of two to four hours a week to hear concerns from many sources including residents, families, friends, and personnel, and get
satisfaction from helping some our most vulnerable citizens. All volunteers receive thirty-six hours of training from us prior to being placed in their assigned facility.

In addition to the many seniors for whom we provide care, we are also grateful to the seniors themselves who give back to our organization. Volunteers are the heart and soul of the American Red Cross, and here in the Capital Region many of our dedicated volunteers are seniors. We have many different types of volunteer opportunities from disaster response to answering phones, data entry, teaching classes, and working at blood drives. Many of our volunteers have been with us for decades, some for more than fifty years. And quite often, some of them follow in the footsteps of a parent who also volunteered.

The Red Cross could not provide all the services we do locally without our volunteers and without financial and blood donors. If you are looking for ways to give back to your community and help those in need, we hope you’ll consider getting involved with your American Red Cross.

Jack-in-the-Pulpit, a spring wildflower found throughout the Huyck Preserve's woods

Gary Striar is Regional Chief Executive Officer for the American Red Cross.
Personal Essay

An Introduction to Mourning

By Susan Hogan

So far I have received six books on mourning; this is not to mention the religious tract someone put in my mailbox at work. Most of these books are more or less divided into the “stages of grief” which Kubler-Ross popularized. For a few months I actually tried to read these books hoping to find out some practical things such as what to do with his clothes, how to change the registration on his Camry, or how to fill out college financial aid applications for my daughter.

Instead I was told to: “Acknowledge my anger,” “Focus on the good memories,” realize that “Grief is a process that takes time and courage and patience.” One book was structured somewhat like a workbook with specific exercises I was supposed to complete. “Write a letter to the deceased telling him or her what you miss most” and write about “what I have learned since he or she died.” Another work reminded me that there “is no timetable for grief and each person must find his or her own path. Take as long as you need.”

Ten months ago my husband died unexpectedly from a brain aneurysm. His health had been excellent and that morning he had played tennis. Around 10:30 p.m., he said he felt dizzy and then within minutes he had lost consciousness, and I was listening to the instructions for CPR the 911 operator was giving me. Within minutes, the blood released from the broken vessel had caused irreversible brain damage. Sixteen hours later I asked that he be disconnected from the respirator.

Aside from the overwhelming sense of unreality in this event, I felt incredibly angry and frustrated. It wasn’t until days later when I finally found some time alone that I let myself scream. How could he do this to me? He left clothes in the hamper, bills unpaid, emails unanswered. Suddenly I became not only a widow but also a single parent. Neither role I had thought much about before this happened.

The day of the funeral I did Google “stages of grief” looking for the Kubler-Ross categories. I thought that perhaps these steps would give me a goal, a way to measure the almost unbearable sense of loss.

A generation ago, people were discouraged from talking about grief or the dead. Widows took to their beds and it was considered proper form to discuss the deceased as little as possible. My brother-in-law told me of his great aunt who died in childbirth leaving four young children. Within months his uncle had
remarried and all traces of the first wife disappeared. The children were instructed to call their stepmother “Mom.”

To her credit, Kubler-Ross did give a language to the mourning process and one would have to have been in a coma for the last twenty years not to know about her seven stages. Kubler-Ross originally worked with people who had been given terminal diagnoses and later said that she didn’t intend these steps to be used like a 12-step program. But we, Americans, are optimists and like to believe that things can improve. We like solutions.

Amazon.com lists about 322,120 books on grief. Unlike skydiving, becoming an expert on grief takes no special talent. By the time one reaches middle age, loss is a given. And although the books I have seen claim there is no special way to grieve, they all, in fact, prescribe a way. I am first and foremost supposed to “acknowledge my grief,” give myself time to “feel bad,” to “focus on the good memories,” and to believe in “the passage of time to heal wounds.”

Often when people hear about my husband’s sudden death, they tell me stories of their losses. They tell me about elderly parents, auto accidents, and suicides as if somehow I will find solace when I hear about others’ tragedies. I have labeled this the “hierarchy of horrors.” And I have been tempted to say, “Ok, you win. A suicide beats a brain aneurysm.”

The only book on bereavement, which I have been able to read successfully, is C.S. Lewis’ A Grief Observed. This was written before anyone thought of the self-help genre. Lewis’ wife died from cancer, and perhaps his most poignant metaphor is comparing grief to an amputation. One never really recovers, but one does get on with it. The intensity lessens, but the wound remains.

I am now coming up on the first anniversary of my husband’s death. I no longer look for him in crowds or slip my arms into the sleeves of his jackets. I no longer sit on the floor of his closet and weep. I am no longer in that state of agitated waiting I found myself in the first few months. In November I laughed for the first time.

My perception of time has changed; I seem to measure it in small increments. I have placed the famous quote from Reverend Sydney Smith (1820) over my desk: “Live as well as you dare and take short views of human life—not further than.”

Susan Hogan lives in Chatham, NY, and teaches English at Hudson Valley Community College. She has published poetry and essays here and there and in 2004 won the New Women’s Voices Prize in Poetry. Her collection of poems is titled Happiness.
Guest Column

New York’s Fully Funded Pension System

By Honorable Thomas P. DiNapoli

In 2000, just over half the states in America had fully funded pension systems, according to the Pew Center on the States. By 2006, that number had shrunk to six states. By 2008, only four—Florida, New York, Washington, and Wisconsin—could make that claim.

“In fact, in an article published last August, Governing Magazine called New York ‘the nationwide pension leader, with the country’s highest-funded public pension.’”

When the Pew Center issued its report last February naming New York as one of the four best managed pension funds in the country, it recognized that my office had protected the one million members and retirees of the New York State and Local Retirement System (NYSLRS), and the rest of the State’s taxpayers, from fiscal irresponsibility. Unlike states such as New Jersey, California, and Illinois that have not always met their funding responsibilities, New York State has consistently paid its annual pension bill, in spite of our own fiscal challenges.

Through our long-term, diversified investment strategy, we’ve been able to ensure that the New York State Common Retirement Fund (the Fund) can cover its current and future commitments. In fact, in an article published last August, Governing Magazine called New York “the nationwide pension leader, with the country’s highest-funded public pension.”

The Fund enjoys its excellent position because we are making sound investments that are producing strong returns for the long-term. As trustee of the Fund, my objective is to manage the Fund in a prudent manner that provides security for our members and their loved ones throughout their retirement years.

The Fund’s strong performance is a testament to our investment policies, which are designed to maximize returns while controlling risk. In fact, last year the Fund posted its third best performance numbers ever, returning 25.9 percent, behind only 1998 (30.4 percent) and 2004 (28.8 percent).

The results for the third quarter of fiscal year 2011 (covering the period October 1, 2010, through December 31, 2010) saw the Fund’s assets rise to $140.6 billion, an increase of 6.01 percent.

Investing in New York’s future

We have long recognized the exceptional and varied potentials of the New York State economy, and invest widely in New York business ventures and companies. For example, since 1991, the Fund’s Affordable Housing Permanent Loan Program has played a major role in improving the lives of thousands of New York State residents while strengthening their neighborhoods. While
earning solid returns, the Fund’s investments have helped provide moderate-income and low-income families across the State with opportunities to rent affordable and attractive properties. By purchasing permanent mortgages, the Fund supports the production of affordable new multifamily housing facilities, and the revitalization of deteriorated or obsolete housing units. Special housing for the State’s senior citizens and other people with special needs is also part of the program. Since the inception of this program, 11,776 units of affordable housing have been completed.

In addition, the Fund has purchased pools of mortgages located in New York State through the New York State Mortgage Pass-Through Program. Since the program’s creation in 1981, the Fund has invested over $9.7 billion in New York-only mortgages; during the past year alone, the Fund purchased $499 million in mortgages, helping enable approximately 2,500 New Yorkers to purchase homes.

All told, investing in these mortgages has allowed the Fund to assist in providing home ownership opportunities for more than 80,200 New York residents.

Recognizing the tremendous growth potential of the emerging clean technology and renewable energy industries, in New York and around the world, I established the Fund’s Green Strategic Investment Program in 2008, committing $500 million to investments in clean energy, energy efficiency, sustainable manufacturing, renewable power, and alternative fuels.

“While earning solid returns, the Fund’s investments have helped provide moderate income and low-income families across the State with opportunities to rent affordable and attractive properties.”

The economic impact of NYSLRS retirees
The ultimate goal of the Fund is to generate a solid rate of return on investment in order to pay benefits to current and future retirees for their lifetimes. With more than $7.6 billion in benefits paid last year, these retirees have a tremendous impact on the State’s economy. In 2009, NYSLRS retirees and beneficiaries totaled 366,178. Approximately three-quarters of these people remained New York State residents, representing 2.3 percent of the State’s population.

NYSLRS retirees make substantial contributions to the State and local economies including:

- $9.5 billion in economic activity and $7 billion in spending in the State during 2009, creating an estimated 55,500 jobs,
- $194 million in sales tax collections for New York’s local governments and $200 million for the State during fiscal year 2009, and,
In hard times and boom times alike, the Retirement System is a vital source of security. Safeguarding the financial futures of our Retirement System members and pensioners remains one of the most important priorities at the Office of the State Comptroller.

Honorable Thomas P. DiNapoli was elected to a full four-year term as New York State Comptroller in November 2010. The State Comptroller, New York’s chief fiscal officer, is responsible for auditing the operations of all State agencies and local governments, managing the State’s pension fund, overseeing the New York State and Local Retirement System, reviewing the State and New York City budgets, approving State contracts, and administering the State’s payroll and central accounting system. Previously, DiNapoli represented northwestern Nassau County in the State Assembly for twenty years. A lifelong resident of Nassau County, DiNapoli first gained recognition in 1972 when he was elected to the Mineola Board of Education at the age of eighteen, becoming the youngest person in New York State to hold public office.

The Huyck Felt Mill operated below the falls for just ten years starting in 1870 and then moved to the banks of the Hudson River in Rensselaer, New York.
Lincoln Pond, the heart of the Huyck Preserve’s research and education campus.
The dam, once the site of a sawmill, dates back to the early 1800s
Our Mission

Albany Guardian Society continues to seek opportunities to improve the quality of life for seniors as we carry out our Mission.

- The mission of Albany Guardian Society is to engage in a broad spectrum of endeavors that will improve the quality of life for seniors.
- We will devote funding to develop and support services for seniors.
- We will create an environment that will maintain the growth of creative and innovative ideas.
- We will fund the exchange of information to enable interested parties to learn how to create a better standard of living for our elders.
- We will attract additional resources to increase the impact we can make as we remain mindful of our mission to serve the elderly.