Findings from Community Conversations in Philadelphia

OVERVIEW

In April 2019, AARP Pennsylvania conducted community conversations in five Philadelphia neighborhoods in order to hear residents’ thoughts and concerns related to three major issues - housing, transportation, and parks/green and public spaces. Over 300+ residents, many of whom were 55+, participated in conversations in Center City, North Philadelphia, Northeast Philadelphia, South Philadelphia and West Philadelphia. In addition, a Telephone Town Hall was held to solicit input from over 250 AARP members who reside in Philadelphia.

This report summarizes the major points that were raised by diverse groups of residents. Although there were some differences based on geographic area, many of the concerns were the same. This report also provides recommendations that could address the concerns that were raised during these community conversations.
KEY FINDINGS

Housing: Across all neighborhoods, the lack of affordable housing was identified as a major issue. Of particular concern is the rise in tax assessments, especially in areas that are experiencing gentrification. Additionally, many Philadelphians expressed concerns about the need for home modifications.

Transportation: Philadelphians across the city expressed varied concerns about transportation, including sanitation and safety when using public transportation, the deteriorated conditions of Philadelphia roads and sidewalks, traffic safety and fatalities, and the lack of adequate parking.

Parks/Green and Public Spaces: Residents in some neighborhoods discussed the lack of green spaces and shared their concerns about safety and poor maintenance. Additionally, many Philadelphians focused on the lack of safety and amenities.

NEXT STEPS
AARP Pennsylvania intends to share this report with the mayoral candidates and City Council members to provide greater insight into residents’ needs around housing, transportation, and parks and green spaces. Additionally, AARP Pennsylvania will share this information with community partners and stakeholders as we work together to identify challenges and opportunities, advocate for local policy changes, and engage residents and officials on making Philadelphia a more livable community for all ages.
HOUSING

AFFORDABILITY
Across all neighborhoods, the lack of affordable housing was identified as a major issue. Of particular concern is the rise in tax assessments, especially in areas that are experiencing gentrification. Many long-time residents are receiving annual increases in their real estate taxes based on the Actual Value Initiative. This is challenging for people on fixed incomes who often cannot afford to pay additional taxes. It was suggested that the millage rate be lowered when assessments are raised.

Rising rental rates and the lack of affordable senior housing were also identified as challenges. Concerns were expressed about large residential developments that don’t include “affordable” units for older adults. It was also noted that many people don’t know where to turn to for services or help.

TAX ABATEMENT
Many participants expressed concerns about the ten year tax abatement, suggesting that the City favors the rich over long-term home owners.

“Many elderly on a fixed income find themselves choosing between paying their taxes, healthcare, medications and food, which is not right!”

“The City has grown into pushing the seniors out and bringing in younger people. They don’t know the value of senior citizens.”

“Instead of giving long-term residents and low-income seniors the tax abatement, they’re giving it to people who can afford to pay taxes.”
HOME MODIFICATIONS
The need to help people stay in their homes as they age was cited as an issue that deserves more attention. Home modifications such as widening doors and staircases, installing grab bars, and putting bathrooms on the first floor are often necessary but expensive. Many participants shared how difficult it is to find affordable, reliable contractors. Most people did not know about the City’s Renew program which helps homeowner’s access low-interest loans to invest in their properties.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
• Lower the millage rate for homeowners.
• Use the 311 system, senior centers and the block captain network to help older adult’s access information about housing policies and programs.
• Implement an “inclusionary” housing policy that makes it mandatory for developers to designate a certain number of units as “affordable.”
• Freeze the Actual Value Initiative for people over 65 and those on fixed incomes.
• Encourage housing developers to use universal design concepts for new housing.
TRANSPORTATION

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION
Sanitation and safety on buses and subways were identified as two major concerns. Participants felt that subways are not clean and SEPTA doesn’t enforce rules about eating and littering on buses. Many people feel unsafe in subways and on the EL.

Additional concerns included buses not stopping close to the sidewalk or exactly at a bus stop, unreliable schedules, and drivers not lowering the platform enough. Difficulties negotiating steps at subway stops, lack of parking at regional rail stations, and the unreliability of the paratransit system were also mentioned.

ROAD AND SIDEWALK CONDITIONS
Maintenance of roads and sidewalks was cited as a major problem in all neighborhoods. Issues included: contractors dumping trash on sidewalks, pervasive pot holes, sidewalks with major crack and tree roots, and lack of enforcement of regulations requiring homeowners to repair their sidewalks. These conditions are particularly dangerous for older people, individuals with disabilities, and bicyclists.

“You have a subway crowded with people going to work and half a dozen people who’ve just done drugs sleeping in subway cars. SEPTA police do not remove these people from the subway system.”

“I no longer feel safe in the El. It’s like a cave. I don’t see any police and I often hear news of muggings and shootings at one of the Transportation Centers.”

“I’m scared to drive home in the dark because I can’t see potholes in the road and I can’t afford repairs.”
TRAFFIC SAFETY
Participants shared their concerns about traffic deaths and the need for more stop signs and speed bumps.

Bikes and bike lanes were discussed in all of the conversations. Participants felt that the location of some of the bike lanes creates safety hazards for older adults and children. The importance of bicyclists obeying traffic rules and strategies for handling dirt bikes and four wheelers was emphasized.

PARKING
Concerns were expressed about people parking on sidewalks, in crosswalks, and on both sides of the street. Participants also felt that there are not enough parking spaces for individuals with disabilities in Philadelphia.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
- Increase police presence at Transportation Centers and on buses.
- Enforce regulations to prevent people from parking in crosswalks and on sidewalks.
- Install speed bumps and more stop signs. Extend timing for pedestrians at crosswalks.
- Encourage corporations to incentivize employees to take public transportation.
- Conduct training for SEPTA drivers to help them better understand the needs of older adults and people with disabilities.

“People are dying in the streets. It’s great that Philadelphia has the Vision Zero plan but I don’t see the serious commitment.”
PARKS/GREEN AND PUBLIC SPACES

The availability of green spaces and perceptions about parks varied by neighborhood. Both the Northeast and Center City residents felt there are an adequate number of parks/green spaces which are welcoming to all ages and cultures. North Philadelphia residents discussed the lack of green spaces and shared their concerns about safety and poor maintenance.

West Philadelphia and South Philadelphia participants focused on lack of safety and amenities such as restrooms, benches in shaded areas, and sufficient lighting as well as poor maintenance.

Libraries were identified as safe places that are important for all age groups. However concerns were raised about lack of staffing, physical deterioration, and lack of current books in some neighborhood branches.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**
- Install benches in shady areas of parks and increase trash removal.
- Enforce leash laws in public parks and/or create dog parks.
- Install book boxes in neighborhood parks where people can donate and borrow free books.
- Improve maintenance of playground equipment and park benches.
- Create signs in multiple languages to assist limited English speaking residents in navigating parks and public spaces.

“My development has row homes with large lawns at the end of each block. Developers are putting houses on those yards. All that cement is not good for ecology and it’s not good for water absorption.”

“It’s a disgrace what our park looks like today. I’m afraid to drive in the park in case a tree falls on my car. I would like places where we can walk, where we can gather, sit down and feel safe and comfortable.”
NEXT STEPS

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Special thanks to community organizations who worked with AARP Pennsylvania to host and/or promote the community conversations including the Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia, Fairmount CDC, Frankford Community Development Corporation, HACE, Northern Liberties Neighbors Association, Rail-to-Trail Conservancy, SEAMAAC, The Enterprise Center, The Greater Northeast Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, The North Broad Renaissance, The People’s Emergency Center, and The Ralston Center.