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

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.[8] 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. 🖎

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