# LOA
## LOCAL OFFICE ON AGING

**Age-Friendly Roanoke**

# 2019 Neighborhood Survey

## Final Report

**May 6, 2019**

# Acknowledgements

A special thanks to AARP for financial assistance and support in conducting the 2019 Neighborhood Survey and to all of our regional partners for supporting this time intensive endeavor. Without the combined contributions of all, none of this would have been possible.

## AARP Age-Friendly Network

AARP's Age-Friendly Network is an affiliate of the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities Program. The program was established to connect cities, communities and organizations worldwide with the common vision of making their community a great place where people can grow old and targets the environmental, social, and economic factors that influence the health and well-being of residents of all ages.

An age-friendly community is a livable community, which is defined as

> *…one that is safe and secure, has affordable and appropriate housing and transportation options, and offers supportive community features and services. Once in place, those resources enhance personal independence; allow residents to age in place; and foster residents' engagement in the community's civic, economic, and social life.* – AARP Policy Book, Chapter 9

# Age-Friendly Roanoke 2019 Neighborhood Survey

# Executive Summary

In December 2017, the City of Roanoke (City) earned AARP's designation as an Age-Friendly City (AFC), joining over 200 other communities nationwide achieving that honor. The 3-year designation was awarded due to the City's ongoing support of and partnership with local organizations working to improve life for older residents.  With the support of City Council, the Local Office on Aging (LOA) leads the local AFC leadership team, which includes representation from the City, Roanoke Valley - Alleghany Regional Commission, Blue Ridge Independent Living, AARP Virginia, Virginia Tech-Carilion School of Medicine, and the Center for Gerontology at Virginia Tech.

## Survey Design

In the winter of 2018-2019, the AFC team conducted a City-wide survey of residents age 45+ to better understand how they perceived the City of Roanoke as a good place to live and grow old. AFC team members designed the survey to help identify specific issues that the City and AFC member organizations could work on to ensure Roanoke remains age-friendly.  The effort coincided with the City's interest in boosting its ratings on the Milken Institute's Best Cities for Successful Aging List and AARP's Livability Index.

Development of the survey was guided by a conceptual model (see Figure A) that includes factors that are known to influence how residents perceive the City and their neighborhoods as good places to live. AARP funded the survey and 53 survey questions on the physical environment (originating from the AARP national livability survey) were included. Those questions addressed the accessibility, availability, and condition of housing, transportation, and public places around the City. An additional 23 questions were included to gain insight into participants' neighborhoods, how they interacted with their neighbors, and how they received information about happenings in their neighborhood and the City. The remaining questions asked about participants' characteristics. Opportunities for writing comments were also provided.
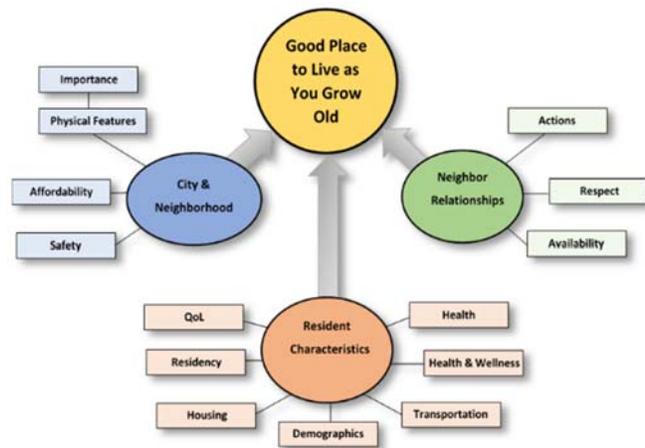


Figure A. Survey conceptual model

## Recruitment

Participants were recruited using multiple convenience sampling strategies (e.g., neighborhood activities, church gatherings, *Next Door* app users) to gain a representative sample of City residents by age, race, and household income. Participants were offered a $5 Wal-Mart gift card as an incentive to complete the lengthy survey and participants' names were entered into two cash prize drawings of $250 each if they desired to be included. Using those strategies, 376 surveys were collected online, and 247 surveys were collected during 12 planned site visits and personal outreach efforts by AFC team members.

## Participants

The 623 participants were statistically representative of City residents and represented diversity in the City by age (age 45-96; average 64.1 years), race (72% White, 24% Black), and household income (58%

reported household incomes over $30,000). More than half (63.7%) of participants have called Roanoke home for more than 5 years and among them more than half (61%) have lived in the City for over 15 years. Most participants (56.3%) owned their own homes and 73.5% drove their own car as their primary means of transportation. Only 27.9% had rode public transit in the last year. Most participants reported being in good health (84.6%) and rated the quality of their life as excellent, very good, or good (87.8%).

## Survey Findings

**Roanoke is home and a good place to live and grow old.** Given their long-term residency, it is not surprising that 83.3% of participants rated the City as an excellent, very good, or good place to live as they grow old. Similarly, 81.5% felt as strong about their own neighborhoods.

**Income.** Household income was the consistent predictor of responses rather than age, race, or neighborhood. Specifically, participants with low incomes tended to respond less favorably towards the City and neighborhood than participants with high incomes, regardless of age, race, neighborhood, or quadrant. Even though the greatest number of participants with low incomes lived in the northwest quadrant of Roanoke, their responses aligned with the responses of low-income residents in other areas of the City.

**Predictive Models.** The survey model was used as a guide to conduct multi-level statistical analysis to predict which survey items significantly explained what makes the City a good place to live and grow old.

Nine items (listed below) were identified and fall under the focus areas of Outdoor Features, Housing, and Neighbor Relationships. The items included

Outdoor Features
- Well-maintained and safe parks
- Public spaces with enough benches
- Sidewalks that are in good condition, free from obstruction and are safe for pedestrian use and accessible for wheelchairs or assistive mobility devices

Housing
- Affordable housing options for adults of varying income levels such as older adult communities with shared facilities and outdoor space
- Homes that are equipped with features such as a no-step entry, wider doorways, first floor bedroom and bath, grab bars in the bathroom
- Well-maintained and safe low-income housing

Neighbor Relationships
- I feel respected by my neighbors.
- If my neighbors knew I needed help, they would be willing to help me.
- My neighbors know I am available to help them, if I know they need help.

> Participants' positive perceptions of City features and their interactions with their neighbors were directly related to their positive perception that the City is a good place to live and grow old.

Also included in the resulting predictive model (see Figure B) is the notion that the *neighborhood is a good place to live and grow old.* Analysis revealed a strong positive connection between participants' beliefs that if their neighborhoods were good places to live and grow old, then the City was also a good place to live and grow old. Working with this underlying relationship is essential to affecting change as

neighborhoods play a significant role in promoting health, well-being, and quality of life across the lifespan and as such, are cornerstones for change within the larger City.
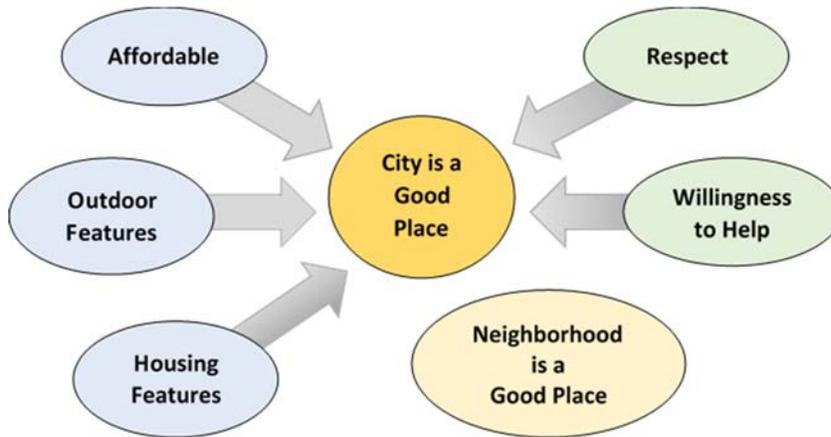


Figure B. Factors that explain what makes the City a good place to live and grow old.

Because the neighborhood/City connection was so strong, we also analyzed the survey data to predict which survey items predicted factors that made the neighborhood a good place to live and grow old. As might be expected, the results were astonishingly similar with one important distinction; transportation features replaced housing features. Transportation is likely more significant at the neighborhood level because people need access to the City from their homes.

**Neighborhood.** Despite the significant role and importance of neighborhood across the findings, many participants struggled to identify their neighborhood from a list of 49 City-designated neighborhoods. Frequently, they only referenced a City quadrant such as southeast. The shift in perception of neighborhood from a defined local area to a region is assumed to be related to their heavy reliance on automobiles to access employment, stores, services, and opportunities.

**Quality of Life.** Just like the neighborhood plays a significant role in predicting if Roanoke is a good place to live and grow old, personal health has a strong relationship with perceptions of quality of life and cannot be ignored. In controlling for health, we found that City features, neighborhoods, and neighbor relationships were significant in predicting a good quality of life.

> Features
> - Audio/visual pedestrian crossings
> - Public spaces with enough benches
>
> Neighborhood and Neighbor Relationships
> - The City of Roanoke is a place for people to live as they grow old.
> - I feel respected by my neighbors.
> - I feel safe living in my neighborhood.

Issues of safety, accessibility, and social connectedness are important to maintaining a quality of life, just as they are important to making the City of Roanoke a good place to live as one grows old.

## Summary of Findings

Participants reported being quite positive about Roanoke as a good place to live and grow old and the neighborhood played a strong supportive role in their perception of the City.

Efforts to enhance the City (and neighborhoods) as a good place to live for older residents should target the specific City features and neighbor relationships identified by the predictive models.

The findings also suggest that the biggest difference between participant responses was income and not age, race, or neighborhood. Participants with low incomes were significantly more likely to rate the City lower as a good place to live and grow old than participants with high incomes. Most older adults who are no longer working live on fixed incomes, which tend to be modest. The participants in this survey included many retirees and persons living on low-incomes representing neighborhoods throughout the City and in all City quadrants.

> Efforts to support an age-friendly City need to be mindful that low-income residents live in every neighborhood, even though they may be concentrated in some areas of the City.

Lastly, the predictive findings align well with participant comments, which revealed concerns over the condition and quality of sidewalks and the accessibility and affordability of housing and public transportation. Thus, survey findings confirm what many residents already perceive to be the City's biggest challenges to remaining an age-friendly community.

## Areas of Focus for the City to Consider

The following recommended actions steps are for the City to consider in maintaining Roanoke as an age-friendly city. Each activity is a direct response to the items identified in the predictive models:

- Enhance current efforts to upgrade or install sidewalks and curbs that are lifespan friendly and can accommodate strollers, wheelchairs, and other assistive devices.
- Install public benches throughout neighborhoods and parks.
- Identify strategies (e.g., financial incentives, or need based programs) for retrofitting current housing stock to make homes more accessible and amenable for aging in place.
- Revisit zoning regulations to ensure opportunities for integration of alternative living arrangements in a neighborhood.
- Implement projects identified in the Transit Development Plan.
- Include older public transportation users in the Public Transportation Advisory Committee and other public engagement opportunities.
- Re-examine neighborhood boundaries and how City neighborhoods are defined. If the focus of age-friendly communities is to be at the neighborhood level, then a better grasp on where neighborhood boundaries lie is imperative before any interventions are planned.
- Partner with naturally-occurring neighborhood groups or gatherings to build neighbor connections (e.g., resident councils, breakfast at Hardees group). Residents who attend clubs tend to be socially connected and active. Use them to connect neighbors (including more socially isolated residents) to neighborhood events.
- Initiate neighborhood service activities. The activity can be purposeful such as litter clean-up or a simple meet and greet. Some neighborhood organizations already hold block parties, which are reportedly helpful in connecting neighbors.

## Moving the Age-Friendly Roanoke Initiative Forward

Affecting change to ensure that the City remains a lifespan-friendly or age-friendly city requires a collaborative community effort that includes organizing the narrative about age-friendly communities, the resources to support an age-friendly environment, and the people (i.e., residents, service agencies, organizations, and government leaders) to affect change at every stage. The message of what it means to be an age-friendly city needs to be articulated and included in every discussion about City and neighborhood planning. To ensure that the message remains vibrant, the following steps should be considered.

### Step 1: Expand Understanding and Raise Awareness of Need

Older adults are a diverse population with a wide range of ideas, needs, wants, and expectations. It is not enough to listen to a handful of older residents and infer that they speak for all older residents. Therefore, it is essential to regularly invite and involve older residents when discussing issues that could potentially affect them.

### Step 2: Build Community Capacity to Respond

To effectively initiate change and sustain those changes, the right people representing the right organizations and government agencies need to be present. The development of roles for community partners that align with their own missions and initiatives is essential to ensure overarching AFC success. Joining forces with other aging-focused groups, such as the Western and Central Virginia Chapter of the National Aging in Place Council, can enhance access to resources and identify persons with needed expertise. At the helm, should be a designated person with strong working relationships with the City government to facilitate conversation, planning, and implementation of AFC activities. As each AFC initiative is identified or launched, the configuration of workgroups may shift to accommodate the focus of work. Still, a strong leadership team that works well with the City needs to remain in place.

### Step 3: Initiate Sustainable Interventions

Developing brand new programs or initiatives can be time-consuming and expensive. A first step towards affecting change could begin by building on current activities and programs already existing within neighborhoods and the City. Such initiatives may not currently have an aging component, but may be well-suited to reach older residents. For example, efforts to increase physical activity outdoors typically focus on children, young adults, and families, but can be "re-tooled" to include older adults. Working with current initiatives is also a good way to build partnerships that would otherwise be unknown.

### Step 4: Measure Outcomes

Measuring whether or not the City is becoming more age-friendly  is essential but will be a challenge as no set standards for measures exist. Performance indicators do not have to include multi-level measures or percentages of use. Indicators can measure whether or not a product or service exists (e.g., a resource guide is published). The goal is to select indicators that are meaningful and can demonstrate that efforts are indeed moving the needle forward.

## Summary

Ultimately, developing a City-wide strategy to help Roanoke maintain its status as an age-friendly community will require ongoing examination of City policies, systems, and environment to ensure an equitable living experience for older residents. The recommendations provided in this report are offered to the City and the AFC leadership team to help them maintain Roanoke's age-friendly status.