promoting Active Transportation* for older adults

*Active Transportation means walking, biking and access to transit.

With the aging of the Baby Boom generation, Alameda County is in the midst of an unprecedented demographic shift: a projected 170% increase in the county’s 65 and older population between 2005 and 2030. Recognizing that mobility is essential to maintaining independence, good health, social connections and economic participation as we age, the Alameda County Transportation Commission promotes access to a spectrum of affordable and reliable mobility options for Alameda County’s aging population. In partnership with public agencies, non-profit organizations, elected officials, the business community, and local citizens, the Alameda CTC seeks to:

- Increase physical activity among older adults by promoting and enabling active transportation (walking/bicycling) options
- Address transportation disparities among older adults, particularly in isolated and disabled populations
- Make public transportation accessible and appealing for older adults

This fact sheet provides an overview of needs and actions related to the role of active transportation in promoting good health and mobility for an aging population.
Active Transportation for older adults

Why?

It is well-known that physical activity provides a wide range of benefits. In addition to supporting overall health and quality of life, several chronic conditions commonly affecting older adults—including arthritis, diabetes, depression, hypertension and heart disease—can be prevented or managed through physical activity. Physical activity can also help reduce or counteract physical effects of aging and provide mental health and social benefits. However, most older adults are too inactive: only 25-34% of older adults get the recommended amount of physical activity. Roughly one-third of older adults ages 65-74 get no leisure-time physical activity, and by age 75, one in three men—and one in two women—engage in no physical activity at all.

Active transportation is a key strategy for increasing rates of physical activity among older adults, particularly for those who lack access to structured exercise programs. In addition, for the more than one in five Americans age 65 and older who do not drive, active transportation provides ongoing mobility through walking, bicycling, and access to transit services.
Much loss of function [among older adults] is thought of as the natural physiological consequences of aging but is actually the result of not being physically active.

— American Society on Aging, Live Well, Live Strong: Steps to Better Health
For older adults and others in our communities to choose active transportation, measures are needed to improve pedestrian safety and access to the pedestrian and bicycle environments. These measures include several “Es”: engineering changes that improve the safety and accessibility of streets, enforcement of traffic laws, education about active transportation options and safe travel, and encouragement through activities and programs that promote walking and bicycling. Some key strategies for promoting active transportation among older adults include:

**Implementing Complete Streets and Universal Design**

In a recent national poll conducted by the AARP, 54% of older adults who reported inhospitable walking, bicycling or transit environments near their homes said they would walk, bike, and take transit more if streets were improved. The “complete streets” approach provides opportunities for physical activity by incorporating features that promote regular and safe walking, bicycling and transit use into street design.

Methods to create complete streets for older adults include retiming signals to account for slower walking speeds, constructing median refuges or sidewalk bulb-outs to shorten crossing distances, and installing curb ramps, improved lighting, sidewalk seating, and bus shelter seating.

Transportation Alternatives’ Safe Routes for Seniors program is an example of a community-wide effort that involved New York City seniors, advocates, and policymakers in developing design recommendations that can be adopted as standards to make streets safer for seniors.

**Rethinking Community and Neighborhood Design**

The density of our communities as well as the proximity of stores and services to older adults’ residences has a significant impact on rates of walking. According to a national study, one in three older non-drivers walks on a given day in more densely-developed areas, compared with one in 14 in more spread-out areas. Community design that promotes smart growth, mixes living and retail spaces, and provides networks of walkable and bikeable streets linking residences, services, stores, and multi-use paths and parks supports active transportation among older adults.
Linking land use planning with public transportation planning also plays an important role. Active transportation is supported by design and siting decisions that take into consideration the proximity of residences and services for older adults to transit stops, as well as the quality of the pedestrian environment between them. Transit-oriented development—dense, mixed use development centered on key transit stops—is a key strategy for providing access to a range of services for older adults within walking distance.

Offering Walking and Bicycling Programs for Older Adults

Programs that promote and support walking are a proven strategy for encouraging older adults to engage in active transportation for the benefit of their health and overall mobility. Walking groups or clubs provide a social means of organized physical activity at no cost to participants, and can include an advocacy component through involvement of participants in walkability audits of their neighborhoods. The United Seniors of Oakland and Alameda County (USOAC) has well-established, peer-led walking groups in the north and central areas of the county, while the City of Fremont is currently implementing walking groups for older adults in the Tri-City area with funding received through the Alameda CTC’s Bicycle and Pedestrian Grant Program.

The innovative Senior Cyclist program in Portland, OR, encourages bicycling as a travel mode for older adults. Group rides tailored to beginning or intermediate riders are offered through the City’s Parks and Recreation Department, which provides three-wheeled bicycles for participants. A two-hour orientation is offered to riders who need extra time to get used to braking, shifting gears, and maneuvering the bicycles. The program has been successful in encouraging older adults to invest in their own bicycles for transportation or recreational use, and rides are now primarily led by older adult volunteers who began as participants.

“When I started actively and regularly participating in the walk club I was able to see the many personal benefits of walking in a group, such as: meeting new neighbors, establishing personal bonds by socializing and opening up more communication with others, and discovering new neighborhoods. Walking has reduced my stress and my mental and physical health has improved – I have a more positive outlook on life and I strongly encourage others to walk more often.”

— Celestine Henderson, Leader of USOAC’s Eastmont Town Center Walking Club, East Oakland
How does Alameda CTC support Active Transportation for older adults?

Alameda County’s half-cent sales tax measure supports planning, funding and legislative efforts to advance Active Transportation for older adults including:

- The national Campaign for Active Transportation, to increase funding for pedestrian and bicycle access to transit, connect communities by completing urban greenway networks, and develop a new countywide Safe Routes for Seniors Program

- Grant funding through a Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety Program and Special Transportation Program for Seniors and People with Disabilities supporting active transportation projects for older adults and people with disabilities

- Countywide bicycle and pedestrian plans that reflect “complete streets” concepts and take older adults’ needs into consideration

- Dedicating nearly 10.5% of Measure B revenues to Specialized Transportation for Seniors and People with Disabilities, including funding for educational initiatives providing comprehensive and multi-lingual information about mobility options, travel training to promote use of transit by older adults and people with disabilities, and projects that improve access to transit.

Information about these efforts and other senior mobility projects and programs funded by Measure B can be found at www.alamedactc.org.
Will You Join Us in Creating an Aging-Friendly Future?

In order to meet the challenges of an aging society and realize the opportunities presented by a healthy, active, and engaged older adult population, a multi-faceted and multi-modal approach to ensuring the ongoing mobility of Alameda County residents is needed.

To find out more about the Alameda CTC’s active and accessible transportation programs or opportunities to partner with the Alameda CTC, please contact Naomi Armenta, Paratransit Coordinator at (510) 208-7469 or narmenta@alamedactc.org.

Please see the back of this fact sheet for links to further information and related resources.

2 Ibid.
3 Great Communities Collaborative, Great Communities Take Care of Senior Mobility Needs. Available from: www.greatcommunities.org.
4 American Society on Aging.
6 Ibid.
7 Great Communities Collaborative.
Related Resources:

AARP Public Policy Institute (2009), Planning Complete Streets for an Aging America:
http://www.aarp.org/research/ssi/

Alameda CTC’s Active Transportation Campaign:
http://www.actia2022.com/transportation.html

Alameda CTC’s Toolkit for Improving Walkability in Alameda County:
http://www.actia2022.com/bikeped.html

American Society on Aging, Live Well, Live Long Health Promotion Modules:
http://asaging.org/cdc/index.cfm

Great Communities Collaborative: www.greatcommunities.org

National Complete Streets Coalition: www.completestreets.org

Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center: www.pedbikeinfo.org

PolicyLink (2009), Healthy, Equitable Transportation Policy: Recommendations and Research: www.policylink.org

Portland, Oregon Senior Cyclist Program:
http://www.portlandonline.com/transportation/index.cfm?a=155167&c=37401

Transportation Alternatives’ Safe Routes for Seniors Program:
http://www.transalt.org/campaigns/pedestrian/safeseniors