

Boomers on Board

Nearly 80 million new seniors soon will be heading for the bus stop at the same time.

BY JAMES B. REED AND NICHOLAS J. FARBER

Watch out, here come the baby boomers—again.

The 76 million members of the post-World War II generation that caused a run on coonskin caps in the 1950s and fostered the counterculture of the 1960s and '70s are about to create a bulge in the over-65 population.

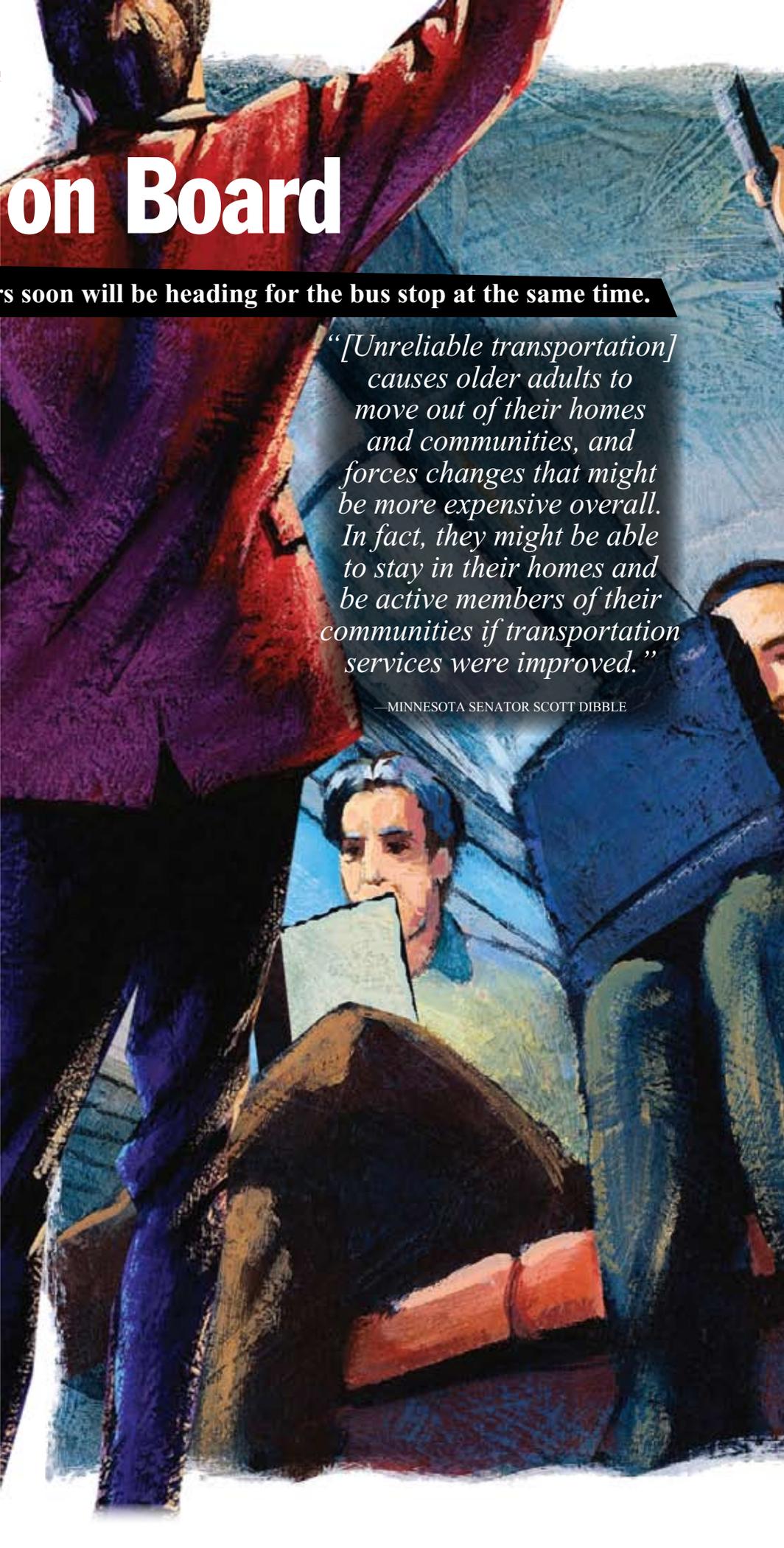
As 2011 dawns, the first wave of baby boomers will turn 65, and policymakers at all levels of government face challenges to meet their needs. The proportion of U.S. residents over 65 is projected to grow from one in eight to one in five. The effect on public services of all kinds will be substantial.

A key issue will be transportation. As people age, they gradually shift from reliance on their own cars to other ways of getting around, including public transportation, rides from friends and relatives, taxis, and special services for trips to the doctor and other appointments. A recent survey in Palo Alto, Calif., found boomers hope to live independently as they age in an environment that makes it easy for them to get around.

Matching these needs with the most appropriate transportation will tax the current systems and drive up costs. A looming challenge is the new health care reform law that will add millions to the rolls of Medicaid and raise the number seeking nonemergency medical transportation. A particularly vexing test will be meeting the transportation needs of retirees in rural and suburban areas that lack good public transportation.

Policymakers at the state and local levels will need to examine everything from driver's licensing to zoning to coordinating public transportation to meet the challenge.

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“[Unreliable transportation] causes older adults to move out of their homes and communities, and forces changes that might be more expensive overall. In fact, they might be able to stay in their homes and be active members of their communities if transportation services were improved.”

—MINNESOTA SENATOR SCOTT DIBBLE

ALL TOGETHER NOW

A mind-boggling number of government agencies, nonprofits and other groups provide transportation discounts and special assistance to those who need them. More than 60 such programs at the federal level alone support such services in rural areas and big cities for the poor, veterans, the disabled, the elderly and Medicaid recipients, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office. They help people get to their jobs, medical appointments, child care, recreation, education and other activities.

All levels of government pay for these programs, although the federal government covers most of the costs. Public transportation systems that operate buses, light rail and on-demand services carry most of the people who need specialized transportation. Hundreds of human service agencies run buses and vans for their clients, creating a confusing web of choices for someone who needs a ride. This leads to overlapping, inconsistent and inconvenient service.

It's not just riders who find the system confusing. State or local government programs are operated by agencies that serve different groups. Their eligibility standards, vehicle needs, operating procedures and routes differ. Programs cross city or county boundaries. Also, state and local officials must cope with federal programs that come with money targeted to different groups of people.

Florida, Kentucky, Washington and Wisconsin are trying to streamline the process by using mobility managers who coordinate transportation services to make sure people get what they need. When they do a good job, these managers reduce confusion for those who use the transportation services and increase the amount of money available to the programs.

Twenty-six states have created coordinating councils for human service transportation. They advocate for better coordination and also let officials in various programs know about the best ways to use their transportation resources.

◆ Washington uses an inter-agency council created by the Legislature in 1998 that works with regional and local organizations. It promotes coordination of special needs transportation and provides a forum for discussing issues and making changes. The council also proposes remedies to the Legislature for the problems it identifies. "It eliminates waste,

helps us avoid budget cuts during these difficult times and allows us to provide more rides to a greater number of people who have special needs," says Senator Mary Margaret Haugen, chair of the Washington Senate Transportation Committee.



SENATOR
MARY MARGARET
HAUGEN
WASHINGTON

◆ In Minnesota, Senator Scott Dibble hopes a coordinating council created this year will correct a number of problems, including operators that don't serve all areas of the state and riders who may be left at county lines or wait hours



SENATOR
SCOTT DIBBLE
MINNESOTA

or days for a trip. The unreliable service creates hardships on those least able to cope. "It causes older adults to move out of their homes and communities, and forces changes that might be more expensive overall. In fact, they might be able to stay in their homes and be active members of their communities if transportation services were improved."

◆ Though Utah has not enacted coordination legislation, the transportation department has made great strides toward getting different agencies to work together. "Legislation seems to be a good idea now that we have buy-in from agencies, metropolitan planning organizations and association of governments," says Repre-



REPRESENTATIVE
JULIE FISHER
UTAH

sentative Julie Fisher. "We have made some real progress in Salt Lake City and other regions, so a statutory framework will only help."

STILL DRIVING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

Baby boomers love their cars and many of them will want to continue to drive into their 80s.

Different states impose various restrictions on drivers as they age. Eighteen require drivers to renew their licenses more often after they reach a certain age, usually 65 or 70. Florida, Maine and Oregon require older drivers to pass a vision test to renew their licenses. Illinois and New Hampshire require drivers over age 75 to take a road test.

Efforts also are being made to accommo-

date physically frail drivers. Steering adaptations such as zero effort steering or foot steering, or electronic aids such as keyless ignitions or adaptive extension levers can be installed in most vehicles. Drivers who have mobility issues in their lower body can have hand-operated brakes and accelerators installed.

To improve roads for older drivers, the Federal Highway Administration in 2004 endorsed a new type font for highway signs called "clearview." Research conducted in Texas and Pennsylvania showed the new font was 16 percent more legible to older drivers than the type used on traditional signs. About 30 states have adopted this font for some road signs.

Aging drivers can take accident prevention courses that educate them about traffic safety, including mirror use, night driving and pedestrian awareness. Thirty-three states require auto insurance discounts for drivers who complete the course.

The good news is that the rate of fatal crashes among drivers age 70 and older declined from 1997 to 2008, according to a recent Insurance Institute for Highway Safety study. The institute attributes the decline to older drivers adjusting their driving habits along with changing state licensing policies.

—Anne Teigen, NCSL

A DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

In 14 states, baby boomers represent at least 28 percent of the current population. The average is 26 percent, with a high ranging from 31 percent in Vermont and Maine to a low of 20 percent in Utah. Providing housing, health care and transportation for this emerging group of older citizens is a key policy issue for legislators to consider as the demographic trend becomes a reality.

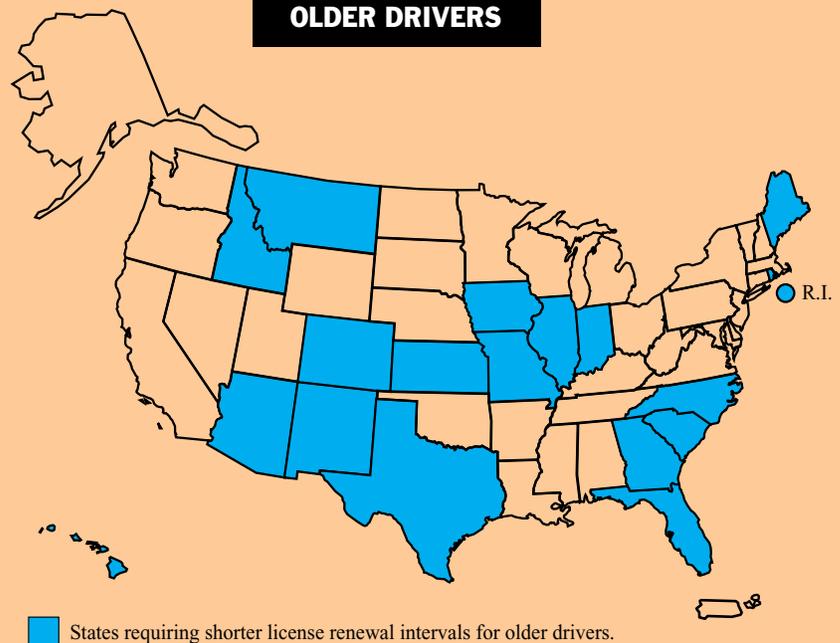
STATES WITH LARGEST CONCENTRATION OF BABY BOOMERS PER CAPITA

STATE	NUMBER OF BABY BOOMERS (AGES 45-64)	AS A PERCENT OF TOTAL POPULATION
Maine	406,977	31%
Vermont	190,321	31
New Hampshire	400,563	30
West Virginia	521,052	29
Montana	280,279	29
Connecticut	998,151	28
Pennsylvania	3,524,079	28
Massachusetts	1,843,831	28
New Jersey	2,417,685	28
Wisconsin	1,570,438	28
Rhode Island	294,208	28
Maryland	1,577,060	28
Ohio	3,180,756	28
Oregon	1,056,152	28

Source: Economic Modeling Specialists, Inc., 2010, U.S. Census Bureau, 2009.



OLDER DRIVERS



IN THE ZONE



Alternatives to driving a car can be key to making a community more livable. Offering people options for how they make a trip to the grocery store or the doctor's office are important.

But since the 1950s, zoning ordinances have separated residential areas from shopping, jobs and schools. It's an approach that makes people more dependent on cars. Yet, one in five adults over age 65 doesn't drive. Some older people have physical problems that make it difficult to walk to bus or metro stops or use alternate transportation. Older Americans also must deal with areas that are poorly designed for pedestrians and have limited or nonexistent public transit options. This can result in isolation and poor health because of a lack of physical activity and an inability to get out of the house.

One option is to incorporate so-called livability principles into existing neighborhoods. AARP describes a livable community as one with affordable and appropriate housing, services that offer support to residents and options for getting around. All these help people maintain their independence and encourage them to engage in civic and social life. A neighborhood need not have all of these features for it be livable, and ease of getting around is often the most important for older people.

Key features of such a community include:

- ◆ Community design that makes it easier to walk, bike or take nearby public transit.
- ◆ Affordable housing policies that allow older people to live near public transit.
- ◆ Community facilities, like schools, that can be used for many purposes.
- ◆ Laws that reduce or eliminate the civil liability for incidents caused by volunteer drivers while they're transporting older or disabled people.
- ◆ Building codes that encourage developers to build accessible housing that include features such as entrances without steps, bathrooms on the entry level, easy-to-reach electrical outlets and wide interior doors to accommodate a walker or wheelchair.
- ◆ Laws that allow the use of golf carts and other low-speed vehicles on public streets. ■■■