



Mableton Farmer's Market. Photo: Studio Fitz.

COMMUNITY INNOVATIONS FOR AGING IN PLACE GRANTEE CASE STUDY

LIFELONG MABLETON:
A PILOT OF
BUILDING LIFELONG COMMUNITIES
IN SOUTH COBB COUNTY

A PROJECT OF
THE ATLANTA REGIONAL COMMISSION

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BACKGROUND

The increasing population of older Americans necessitates an expansion in programs and services that are responsive to their priorities and needs.¹⁻³ Given the challenges of independent living for those with suboptimal health and/or functioning, programs that facilitate aging in place represent an important component of a responsive service system.⁴ Such programs remain novel,⁵ with much to be learned at both the local and national level—including identification of best practices for direct service delivery, as well as approaches that promote systemic solutions and community-wide changes. *Community Innovations for Aging in Place* (CIAIP) was funded from 2009 to 2012 by the United States Administration on Aging (AoA) in response to the need for systemic and integrated responses to shifting demographics. Through CIAIP, demonstration projects were funded in fourteen sites around the country. In addition, the Center for Home Care Policy and Research (CHCPR) of the Visiting Nurse Service of New York (VNSNY) was chosen as the Technical Assistance Grantee (TAG), which included VNSNY staff and consultants, to provide training and other supports focused around program design, program implementation, communication, and evaluation (see Table 1 for listing of sites and TAG members).

This case study report is one in a series of six case studies developed by the TAG. The case studies describe program models, challenges, and

Table 1: CIAIP Grantees

Atlanta Regional Commission, Atlanta, GA
Boston Medical Center, Boston, MA
Catholic Charities, Kansas City, MO
Catholic Charities, Stockton, CA
City of Montpelier, VT
The Coordinating Center, Millersville, MD
Easter Seals New Hampshire, Inc., Manchester, NH
Family Eldercare, Austin, TX
Jewish Family Service of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM
L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center, Los Angeles, CA
Mt. Sanford Tribal Consortium, Gakona, AK
Neighborhood Centers, Inc. Bellaire, TX
New York City Department for the Aging, New York, NY
Supportive Women’s Network, Philadelphia, PA
Center for Home Care Policy & Research, VNSNY (TAG)

lessons learned for organizations and funders seeking to develop aging in place programs, as well as others with interest in the topic. Data for this and other case studies was gathered primarily through site visits and in-person interviews and discussions with program staff and stakeholders.* Depending on the site, stakeholders included some combination of clients, partners, Advisory

Board members, and community members with interest and expertise in issues related to aging in place. Additional information came from reviews

* The data collection was approved by the Institutional Review Board of The New York Academy of Medicine, a member of the VNSNY TAG.

of program documents including project proposals, reports, and outreach materials.

CIAIP grantees developed a range of program models and specific services. For the purpose of the case studies, they could have been grouped and categorized along a number of dimensions. The framework we utilized focused on a grantee's overall approach and delineated five overarching themes:

1. Broad based community development and planning
2. Service provision in settings where older people live and congregate
3. Building bridges across program and organizational "silos"
4. Mobilizing human and social capital through volunteering and advocacy
5. Reaching out to and engaging specific groups of overlooked or disenfranchised older adults

Building Lifelong Communities in South Cobb County, a project of the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), Area Agency on Aging, is an example of the first approach. *Building Lifelong Communities in South Cobb County* piloted its model with *Lifelong Mableton*, a project focused on building capacity—through planning, design, programming, and community engagement—to transform the built and social environment of Mableton, an Atlanta suburb, into a community that is "livable" for older adults and for individuals of all ages.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT AND OLDER ADULTS

The community context, including both the socioeconomic and built environment, is increasingly recognized as an important predictor of health for individuals and populations.⁶ Community context is particularly relevant within the field of aging, as older adults often have distinct and pronounced needs related to a number of environmental factors, including housing, accessibility, and social interaction. With terminology such as "age friendly," "elder friendly," and "lifelong," there are a number of approaches to community transformation that prioritize the interests and needs of older populations. These approaches, which are advocated and facilitated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC),⁷ the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA),⁸ the World Health Organization (WHO),⁹ AARP International,¹⁰ and others, generally include significant attention to: Basic needs (food, housing, safety); mobility and accessibility (transportation, walkability and proximity

to needed services); and opportunities for community engagement, social connectivity, and physical activity.

Older, low density suburban communities, built for young families, are unlikely to have sufficient “age-friendly” attributes. Such communities generally separate single family homes from multi-family homes and from commercial and civic structures. The assumption is that automobiles are the preferred method of transportation¹¹—rather than walking or public transit. Older adults may become isolated in such communities, particularly if they are far from familiar neighbors and unable to drive. Redesigning suburban communities so they are appropriate for an older population may require multisectoral efforts, which are significantly more transformative in nature than those required in urban environments. For example:

- Cities may need to make public transportation more accessible by offering reduced fares and “kneeling buses.” Suburbs require substantial changes to the transportation infrastructure, including additional options for non-drivers that facilitate mobility for older residents.
- Cities might need to repair sidewalks and lengthen the “Walk” time on traffic lights to become accessible to older residents. However, suburbs may need to build sidewalks and install traffic lights (and walk signs).
- Cities might provide training and technical assistance to commercial establishments so they are more sensitive to the needs of older customers. However, suburbs have the more daunting task of developing commercial establishments so that older adults can more easily access needed goods and services.

As described below, *Lifelong Mableton* has taken on the substantial challenge of transforming a suburban community so it better meets the needs of its older (and its younger) population. The progress and accomplishments of this initiative provide valuable lessons for others focused on the creation of lifelong communities and environments.

THE SETTING

Mableton is an ethnically diverse, relatively low-income suburban community of approximately 30,000 people in southern Cobb County, Georgia. Approximately 20% of Mableton’s population are older adults, with significantly higher percentages (up to 60%) in certain census tracts.¹² The

community is twelve miles from downtown Atlanta and offers a number of services and amenities within a five mile circumference. These include an arts center and amphitheater, a park in the outer core, a walking/biking trail, a community center and a multipurpose senior center for active adults, a hospital, and a number of civic and business establishments. However, population density in Mableton is relatively low, which limits the likelihood of significant expansions in commercial development.

Reflecting the era it was developed, the layout of Mableton, without a town center, assumes that residents can and do drive rather than walk. Close to half the housing stock is at least 30 years old,¹³ as most waves of development in the Atlanta region passed the community by. Housing values have dropped significantly, making it difficult for older homeowners to sell their property¹⁴ in order to downsize. In addition, Mableton is unincorporated, meaning that it lacks an official city structure and local elected officials to coordinate programs and services, and to advocate for Mableton's interests. As explained by one resident:

There is no Mableton mayor or city council or anything... I've looked at how some areas get so much money to do stuff and other areas don't get anything. I realized it had to do with how active the mayor was in pushing what he wanted for his area. Because there is no one here—it's one of the reasons [Mableton] has been neglected.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Overview

Lifelong Mableton is a pilot of *Building Lifelong Communities in South Cobb County*, a project focused on building capacity—through planning, design, programming and community involvement—to transform Mableton into a community that is “livable” for older adults and individuals of all ages. Led by the Atlanta Regional Commission's Area Agency on Aging, *Lifelong Mableton* builds from ARC's participation in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) *Community Partnerships for Older Adults* program, which provided ARC with time to develop the groundwork from which an appropriate framework could be developed. *Lifelong Mableton* also builds from a nine day design charrette¹², funded by government, foundation, and private sources, involving 1,500 participants, including developers, state and county officials, community members, and local and national experts from multiple fields—

all focused on the various aspects of planning (e.g. housing, public health, transportation, economic development) for lifelong communities in the Atlanta region. Finally, *Lifelong Mableton* benefits from its base at ARC, which: 1) links it to resources and information at the state and national level that a smaller, more local organization would be unlikely to have easy access to, and 2) encourages a multisector and flexible approach responsive to the realities of economic and social conditions.

Lifelong Mableton includes a diverse set of programs and activities that incorporate changes to the built environment, community engagement, and incubation of health promoting services and activities, so as to create a community reflective of the needs and preferences of all residents. Staffed by urban planners, who work in collaboration with service providers, the initiative takes a systems approach to aging in place. It is oriented toward three general Lifelong Community goals: 1) promote housing and transportation options, 2) encourage healthy lifestyles, and 3) expand access to services.¹² It is also oriented toward Mableton-specific goals, which were developed by local citizens and elected officials who participated in a number of community planning processes, including the Livable Communities Initiative, the South Cobb Implementation Plan, the Recreate Mableton Charrette process, and the Mableton Arts study. The specific Lifelong Mableton goals are to:

1. Transform Mableton into a healthy, attractive community, offering the services residents want and need as they age, as well as a community design that addresses the physical needs of older adults.
2. Identify barriers that limit the ability of individuals to age in place.
3. Help implement initiatives that will lead to Mableton's transformation.
4. Ensure that Lifelong Mableton serves all community residents, including starter families, empty nesters, and everyone in between.

Lifelong Mableton has received significant media attention, such as inclusion in *Coming of Age in America*, a forthcoming PBS documentary (supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation) and articles in the AARP Bulletin (*Towns and Cities Prepare for Aging Populations: Older Americans want to Age in Place*, March 14, 2011), the Atlanta Business Chronicle (*Building Better Communities*, November 4, 2010), and a number of other local publications.

Lifelong Mableton received the EPA's *Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging 2011 Commitment Award* for combining smart growth principles with the concepts of active aging. In 2012, the Georgia Planning Association awarded *Lifelong Mableton* an *Outstanding Initiative for a Large Community* award for its diverse accomplishments, including the form-based code, new elementary school, and community garden.

As a pilot, *Lifelong Mableton* is expected to provide lessons for replication in other communities. In fact, the Atlanta Regional Commission has been replicating *Lifelong Mableton* activities in multiple Atlanta area communities. To date, Lifelong Community resolutions have been passed in four counties, community assessments have been conducted in eight counties, four jurisdictions have adopted zoning changes, and 18 community gardens and 34 farmers markets have been established.

Community Engagement

One of *Lifelong Mableton's* greatest accomplishments is its collaborative approach, which involves working with community members and organizational partners to identify priorities and activities, advocate for their development, and jointly implement them, either on a pilot or permanent basis. At its start, *Lifelong Mableton* faced challenges to community buy-in, due to the focus on older adults. As explained by one Mableton resident and key stakeholder:

The real estate collapse hadn't happened yet, and we were still seeing a good strong influx of young families. And, all I could think was, "Oh no, here we are. We're going to be labeled the best place to be old in the metro area." I get it. I get, "What's good for older adults is good for everybody." I am an older adult. I'm not opposed to older adults. But my community has been asleep for thirty years, and we're finally awake. And by and large, the folks that think the big thoughts in my community are not my age. They're the kids. I don't want to do anything to discourage young families from moving here.

Because of these fears, *Lifelong Mableton's* attention to residents of all ages was essential. The resident quoted above explained her eventual acceptance of the project:

[A Lifelong Mableton staff person] came and didn't seem to think that the only people she could talk to were old people—and didn't seem to think that the only people that mattered were old people.

Collaborators, in fact, represent diverse sectors and include organizations (and individuals) without a particular interest in older adults. These include:

- Mableton Improvement Coalition, a local citizens group
- Cobb & Douglas Public Health, the local public health departments
- Cobb County Department of Transportation
- Cobb County Parks & Recreation
- Cobb County Board of Commissioners
- Cobb Public Schools
- South Cobb Redevelopment Authority
- AARP
- Cobb Faith Partnership
- Wellstar Health Systems, the local hospital system
- Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co., an urban design and planning firm
- South Cobb Business Association
- Safe Routes to School
- Mableton Community Day Coalition
- Emory University's Fuqua Center for Late-Life Depression

By design—and with thoughts to sustainability—ongoing oversight and management of *Lifelong Mableton* activities are the responsibility of collaborators that have a base in the community and human and/or financial resources that can be dedicated to the activity long term. Collaborators thus play significant roles in *Lifelong Mableton* activities. However, of equal importance, is the participation of *Lifelong Mableton* staff in the activities of collaborating organizations, and the opportunity for expanded dissemination of lifelong principles that such participation provides. In addition, by supporting the work of collaborators, those organizations—most notably Cobb & Douglas Public Health, which was awarded a CDC Community Transformation Grant (CTG)—have become potential funding sources to sustain program activities.

As noted above, collaborators understood and accepted the contention that “what’s good for older adults is good for everyone,” but they also noted

overlapping interests in particular activities (e.g. the community gardens) or in general aims (the economic revitalization of Mableton). They appreciated the strength of the *Lifelong Mableton* initiative and the capability and diligence of its staff with respect to identifying new resources, jumpstarting activities, and making important linkages. Collaborators commented on new and valuable connections made through the initiative (e.g. Mableton Improvement Coalition connecting to the public health department) that never would have existed otherwise.

Program Components and Activities

Although an exhaustive listing of program components and the activities that comprise them is beyond the scope of this report, the most substantial and sustained efforts are described below. It should be noted that staff made multiple efforts to elicit resident input to identify and design these activities, including a week-long planning session, focused on re-envisioning downtown Mableton; a PhotoVoice project to document and assess walkability, as well as factors that impede it; an online community assessment survey; and a phone survey of faith-based services for older adults. Community assessments are, in fact, considered a key part of program activities.

Form Based Code

Likely the most significant accomplishment of *Lifelong Mableton* is the development and passage of a Form Based Code by the Cobb County Board of Commissioners. Code development was an inclusive process that included a week-long planning session with community members, county officials, ARC staff, and other stakeholders. The Form Based Code will facilitate the creation of a pedestrian-friendly town center that connects the library, post office and arts center and creates a public town square that should attract new business and will shift zoning ordinances to allow for: 1) a mixture of single and multi-family housing, so that older adults might downsize without leaving their neighborhoods and increase population density so as to attract commercial establishments; and 2) mixed commercial and residential use to promote walkability for all ages.

The Form Based Code took many years and significant resources to develop and faced challenges from within and outside Mableton. Some Mableton residents feared increased population density and a negative impact on the schools (which in turn have a significant impact on real estate values). The fact that the schools were relatively weak served to defuse this

argument, as it was considered possible that new development might attract families with resources to strengthen local education. In addition, the focus on older adults was understood to be a net gain, as older adults bring in tax dollars without adding to school district responsibilities. Residents were particularly interested in increased commercial options and came to realize that new businesses would be unlikely to come to Mableton without increased population density. This information served to alleviate the concerns of Mableton residents, who came to support the proposed changes. Outsiders, in contrast, feared that the changes would set a precedent that could impact on the zoning regulations in their towns. These concerns were addressed with regulations specifically noting that the changes are not to be considered as a precedent in other parts of Cobb County and that other towns would have to go through a similar planning process prior to developing similar plans.

Implementation of many parts of the Mableton Plan requires investment on the part of private developers, which is unlikely in the current economic climate. In contrast, changes to roadways, sidewalks, and walking paths, which were identified through the charrette process and championed by *Lifelong Mableton* and its partners, are included in the list of expenditures covered under a four-year Special Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) for Cobb County,¹⁵ which was approved in March 2011.

Farmers' Market

The Farmer's Market, located in the parking lot of Mableton's art center and amphitheater, is open 19 weeks per year on Thursday mornings. The weekday morning time frame was selected to be most appealing to the older adults who were the target population for the market. In addition to being a source of fresh produce, the market has served as a central gathering place and a popular activity for residents of the community, thus providing a much needed opportunity for social engagement, as well as good nutrition. The market is a prime example of *Lifelong Mableton's* collaborative approach, and demonstrates its ability to partner with organizations having a range of interests:

- AARP, one market partner, has provided shuttle transportation to older adults from senior housing to the market and has subsidized carpools by providing gas cards for drivers. AARP provides individuals that participate in these programs \$5.00 in coupons for market purchases. AARP has also provided SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) enrollment opportunities weekly at the market.

- Local medical providers, such as WellStar Health Systems and Emory-Adventist Hospital, are at the market on a regular basis to provide blood pressure, cholesterol, and other screenings, as well as preventative health education.
- Cobb & Douglas Public Health was able to access funds from the State of Georgia for tables, chairs, tents, signage, and advertising for the market. Interns from Cobb & Douglas Public Health developed and staffed a Children’s Corner at the market with different activities each week and a Market Information Booth. As one staff member said:

It was nutrition education through fun activities. [The children] made smoothies and planted their own vegetable seeds in little pots. And colored [pictures of] vegetables and placed them on charts and talked about how they were good for you. So, the parents could bring their children and shop while [public health] interns were working with the kids.

Evaluation findings suggest that the Farmers Market motivates shoppers to come out who would otherwise remain at home (65% of attendees surveyed in year 2) and that once out, they would do additional shopping elsewhere (45% of attendees surveyed).

Community Garden

A one acre intergenerational community garden including the AARP “Plant a Row for the Hungry” (described below) was first planted in the fall of 2010. The garden has a mix of experienced (80%) and first time (20%) gardeners, with approximately 30% being older adults. *Lifelong Mableton* staff identified the property (“a weedy looking field”) for the garden and a funder (Kaiser Permanente) to cover start-up expenses. By the end of the first traditional growing season, 28 out of 30 garden plots were occupied. During the second season, all plots were leased, and a waiting list was created. The “Plant a Row for the Hungry” program expanded their plot significantly.

- AARP’s Plant a Row for the Hungry is a 1,200 square foot plot within the garden where volunteers grow food –including eggplant, tomatoes, peppers, okra (“like you wouldn’t believe”) and other vegetables and deliver the produce to the local food bank. Over 480 pounds of produce were donated during the first year, and

nearly 1,500 pounds of produce will be donated in year two. AARP has also purchased storage units for tools, and benches so that gardeners have a place to sit and gather before and after their work in the garden. They host celebrations at the garden each year, which serve to increase interest in the garden and in other AARP activities.

- The Mableton Improvement Coalition (MIC) has accepted administrative responsibility for the garden. All gardeners automatically become members of MIC, thereby expanding MIC's outreach and influence.

Safe Routes to Schools (SRTS)

Lifelong Mableton partnered with the *We Can! in Cobb*, an evidence-based program administered by Cobb & Douglas Public Health, to plan and access funding for the development of a safe route to the Floyd Middle School, which is located on a five lane thoroughfare, across the street from a McDonald's restaurant. The McDonald's is a significant attraction for middle school students. Outcomes to date include moving the school entrance so it is not on the main road and getting a traffic light in front of the school, so children can cross safely. Additionally, Mableton Elementary has started an SRTS program and is exploring the idea of a Grandparents Club that would, among other things, provide adult chaperones to children who walk to school.

Mableton Mental Health Collaborative

The goal of the Mableton Mental Health Collaborative is to improve the support and resources available to older adults with mental health issues, so they can age in place. The Collaborative provides a forum to discuss needs and resources relevant to this population, increase awareness regarding mental health issues, and facilitate expansion and improvement in care for older adults living with mental illness. Collaborative accomplishments to date include: Depression screening at community events; mental health first aid trainings for providers, family caregivers, and faith leaders; updated mental health information within existing resource guides; and convening local organizations, agencies, and businesses to share information, resources, and contacts.

CHALLENGES

Although *Lifelong Mableton* has had a number of successes, challenges remain, as would be expected for a project of this scale. Three of the most significant are described below:

1. The housing crisis and economic downturn have impacted on the timetable for implementation of portions of the Mableton plan. Funds are not currently available for the new development necessary for creation of a mixed use town center. This is a disappointment, as considerable efforts and funds were devoted to the development of the Form Based code and plans for community redesign. However, the form-based code will be in place when the market recovers and should, at that time, facilitate development consistent with Lifelong Community principals.
2. Transportation has been identified as a very significant problem in Mableton, because it is a community (like most of the Atlanta metropolitan area) built on the assumption that residents have and use an automobile. However, many people outlive their driving abilities by many years. Public transportation in Mableton is limited and faces additional cuts in future years. *Lifelong Mableton* has—and continues to explore—options to address this issue, but progress has been slow and partners have been unwilling to implement alternative transportation options.
3. Careful planning, including ceding responsibility for certain program activities (e.g. the community garden) to other organizations, means that much of the work of *Lifelong Mableton* will continue even after the CIAIP grant ends. However, given the delays in implementation due to the economy and other factors, there is a continuing need for dedicated staff with expertise in community development, community organizing, and urban planning. Maintaining staff with these skills would likely require a continuation of outside funding.

SUMMARY AND LESSONS LEARNED

Lifelong Mableton is a remarkable effort that has brought together multiple organizations with diverse interests to design, plan, and implement programs and activities, with the end goal of significant transformation of the built and social environment of Mableton into a community that is “livable” for older adults and individuals of all ages. Given its scope, it is a project that requires significant time and funding, as well as a strong institutional

base. A project such as this also requires well-qualified and dedicated staff with expertise in a broad range of topics, including community organizing and assessment, urban planning, and older adult needs and services. Organizations that seek to implement similar projects should understand that they must make a long term commitment and a significant investment of staff and resources. Other important lessons include:

- Given that relatively few organizations within a given community focus on aging and those that do are more likely to take a service delivery than community development approach, appropriate messaging and inclusiveness is important, so that common ground might be identified with organizations and individuals concerned with other populations and other issues.
- Community transformation requires changes in policy and practice by governmental, non-profit, and commercial establishments. Broad based support, advocacy and education are necessary to convince stakeholders that recommended changes are appropriate and consistent with the interests of residents, particularly if regulations and/or financing are involved. Consequently, a larger and more diverse group of collaborators is necessary, as compared to other types of projects.
- Environmental and policy changes are slow and may be impacted by conditions (such as the economy) outside the control of program staff. To ensure ongoing positive outcomes, and to sustain buy-in, it is beneficial to have a mix of activities, including some that are “early-wins,” and help the community to visualize and comprehend the Lifelong Community plan.¹²
- Environmental change is multifaceted and involves a number of discrete activities. In order to sustain the activities, it is critical to eventually transfer control from planners to organizations with the resources (and the mission) necessary for ongoing implementation and monitoring.

In conclusion, *Lifelong Mableton* offers an impressive model for community transformation that may serve as an example for other communities that require significant structural transformations. Although the volume of work, resources and the skill required should not be underestimated, the potential for widespread positive change should serve as inspiration.

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