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As population grows older, changes must be made

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DULUTH - While the growth rate of metro Atlanta in terms of population is slowing, that population is also getting older.

And fast.

According to Kathryn Lawler, a project manager with the Atlanta Regional Commission's Lifelong Communities Study, 20 to 23 percent of the metro area's population will be over age 60 in the year 2030. Today, she said, that same population only encapsulates 10 percent of the population.

"It's the biggest demographic shift this region will ever experience and it's not just happening in Atlanta," Lawler said. "Change is happening and we are growing older."

The question then becomes, what do we do about it?

That's where the Lifelong Communities Study comes into play, Lawler said.

The study has been progressing during the last year at various locations across the metro area. The goal of the project is to try to envision communities designed and planned where people could live their entire lives, something that is not really possible right now, she said.

So instead of building out, the study is trying to get the political and business leaders to the table who can plan and build where the infrastructure already exists, the thought being older people aren't cast out from their homes to gated communities with age restrictions far removed from the rest of the county or city.

"We need to help the market understand the diversity (in age)," Lawler said. "We need to make sure these older people are not put way out ... Atlanta is in big trouble when it comes to older people driving."

In Gwinnett County, the group studied the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District and specifically Gwinnett Place Mall - "Because it's a typical American mall," Lawler said.

She said what the study tried to show was that the area around or at the mall had huge redevelopment potential, with one idea being turning the mall center into an open, town square type of development.

"We're just trying to get some traction around the ideas," she said. "Gwinnett Place Mall is asking for some imagination."

Joe Allen, the director of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District, said he and his board members were impressed by what they heard from Lawler and the Lifelong Communities Initiative thus far.

"We have a greater opportunity now that instead of just continuing to develop the next green field where we cut down the trees and put new development, that maybe people will now start looking at redevelopment," Allen said. "Instead of the sprawl continuing to pull through Gwinnett and out of Gwinnett, maybe things will start coming back to the Pleasant Hill Roads and Jimmy Carter Boulevards of our community."

Lawler said it's those types of places that need to become better suited at allowing people to live there forever.

"A real community that will ride through life with you has to be one that has some resilience built in so that it doesn't fall apart to you v you experience small or big changes in life," she said.

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