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## [MAINE COMPASS: Transportation needs of seniors will increase with growing numbers](#)

Chris Huck

As if we did not have enough to worry about, with rising gas prices and an increasingly expensive highway system, one more transportation crisis lurks around the corner: The baby boomers are getting older.



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In 2010, Kennebec and Somerset counties combined had 25,240 residents older than 65 -- about 16 percent of the population. Another 24,000 residents are 55 to 64 years old. By 2025, the number of those older than 65 will approach one-quarter of the region's total population.

Most of the national debate has been about the strain that baby boomers will place on Social Security and Medicare. Meanwhile, local governments already are coping with increased demand for senior-oriented housing, recreation and health care services. The impact of the aging generation on transportation services, however, is likely to be just as large.

Seniors are much more likely than the general population to be challenged by the current transportation system, both physically and financially. Senior incomes often are reduced, making gas and vehicle costs even more painful. Various age-related physical infirmities conspire to make driving itself more challenging to seniors.

What happens when seniors can no longer drive? In the past, they lived in neighborhoods where they could walk or use public transportation. Sometimes they relied on younger relatives.

In 1960, 45 percent of the Kennebec County population lived in Augusta or Waterville; in 2010, only 29 percent did. Sprawl is combining with the baby boom to add to the transportation challenge.

The issue is more than aging households; it's rural, aging households. The last census announced that Maine is the most rural state in the nation, as well as the oldest. Kennebec and Somerset counties are two of the oldest, most rural counties in Maine, which means we will be among the first to grapple with the transportation effects of these twin trends.

Answers are a long way off.

The [Maine Department of Transportation](#) can make roads safer, but that's small comfort. Public transportation, such as Kennebec Explorer, is essentially available only in Augusta and Waterville. It is poised to expand, but is limited by economics.

It is simply not possible to serve a population as dispersed as ours without massive public subsidy.

Solutions may be social. Many elderly now rely on friends and neighbors to get them places.

This option is shrinking, however, as people become less connected to their communities and travel costs continue to rise.

Perhaps some localities could set up senior ride boards, similar to what is now done for commuter ride-sharing, or meals-on-wheels programs could expand to deliver drug store and supermarket items.

Or, solutions may be technological. Imagine if 20 years from now, a senior citizen will be able to use her smart phone to summon a driverless drone for her errands. Or maybe banks, insurance companies and law offices will have learned how to offer face-to-face remote services.

One possible solution may be outside the transportation realm altogether. Senior housing communities are becoming much more in demand.

The Maine State Housing Authority estimates an unmet need of 1,700 affordable senior homes in this region alone. Aging baby boomers could triple that demand by 2025.

Senior housing communities provide a higher population density, and a potential node for both social services and public transportation. Conceivably, we could see one or two senior communities in each town, with a regular bus route connecting them to urban services.

Whatever the future may hold, it is clear that our current practice of dependence on the personal automobile in a sprawled landscape is unsustainable as our population ages. The longer it takes us to acknowledge and plan for that fact, the more difficult and expensive the solutions will be.

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