

Communities for Life

■ Shelton and Brigitte Stanfill liked everything about living in Atlanta except the traffic.

When the noise and the gridlock finally became unbearable four years ago, they moved to Serenbe, a mixed-use community in south Fulton County where the living was easier and so was the walking.

Mixed-use communities incorporate residential, retail and commercial properties in neighborhoods within easy walking distance of services and amenities such as schools, shops and libraries.

"Everything is accessible here," said Shelton Stanfill, 69. "We're able to walk to restaurants and shops. We can walk in the woods and enjoy outdoor activities. It's a mixed demographic with young

couples and children, and that's one of the things I like. Ansley Park was a lovely place to live for 11 years, but my wife and I disliked the traffic."

The Stanfills are not alone. Atlanta traffic is a problem for residents as well as commuters. In a recent study, Atlanta ranked as the 10th worst out of the 52 largest U.S. metropolitan areas on a Pedestrian Danger Index. And people 65 and older make up two-thirds of walkers who are killed.

"Everybody is focusing on traffic congestion, but there hasn't been as much consideration and funding for pedestrians, especially seniors," said Sally Flocks, of PEDS (Pedestrians Educating Drivers on Safety), an Atlanta group that works with AARP Georgia to train

engineers and designers to think about people, not just cars.

There have been some successes. Wheelchair ramps at curbs are being built whenever a street is repaved, and signs indicating pedestrian right of way have been erected at crosswalks.

As the population ages, it is important to make it easier for older people to navigate their environment, not only outside the home but inside as well. Universal design homes are accessible to everyone regardless of age or disability, with wider doors and step-free entries. These features could benefit the 64 percent of people 55 and older who plan to remain in their homes as long as possible, according to a study by the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC).

In 2009, the commission co-sponsored a forum to explore how neighborhoods could become "lifelong communities"—where older people can live as their needs and lifestyles change. The result, said the ARC's Laura Keyes, was the development of master plan guidelines for five mixed-use, mixed-income, intergenerational communities that offer transportation alternatives and promote physical activity and healthy living.

These include Mableton in Cobb County, Boulevard Crossing on the Atlanta Beltline, the cities of Conyers and Fayetteville, and the Toco Hills neighborhood in DeKalb County.

"The proposed changes include sidewalks, bike lanes, more accessible intersections, streetscaping and things that create a quality of life on the street," Keyes said.

There will be more discussion of lifelong communities at the Congress for the New Urbanism, to be held May 19-22 at the Atlanta Hilton. For more information, go to www.cnu.org.

"AARP knows that our members need healthy communities that are both walkable and engaging to maintain quality of life as they age," said Matthew McWilliams of AARP Georgia.

Although Atlanta, Suwanee and DeKalb County have made improvements, Flocks said, organizations such as PEDS are fighting to convert a car society into one that is pedestrian-friendly.

"It's going to be extremely dangerous in the suburbs for older people who don't drive," she said. "The solution for seniors is to move to areas that have a street grid and believe in walkers."

—By Don O'Briant