

## **Auto Is Most Important Travel Option for Elders**

By Sandra Rosenbloom



By 2030, almost every person who reaches traditional retirement age will do so as a licensed driver; even in 2008, almost 92 percent of Americans over 70 had a driver's license, and most were active drivers. It should not be surprising then, that the car is the most important travel mode of all older people, whether or not they drive. In fact, each successive generation of older people is more likely than previous generations to depend on the car for mobility, and less likely to use alternatives. In many ways, older drivers are the safest drivers on the road. But driving skills tend to decline with advancing age. As a result, many of the large and growing number of older drivers will have to stop driving and may face significant mobility losses when they do so.

Older drivers are often encouraged to give up driving and instead avail themselves of community transportation alternatives. In reality, such transportation options are often unresponsive to the needs of most older travelers and, what's more, are currently in short supply and will be stretched even further in the future. A 2007 study found that in 10 major metropolitan areas, eligible travelers received the equivalent of only one trip per year from such transportation alternatives. The 2001 National Household Travel Survey revealed that fewer than 1 percent of the trips of those over age 65 were made using such options—a figure that has declined since 1995. The second most important travel choice of older travelers is walking—all other modes combined are relatively insignificant for most older people.

This situation must be taken into account in any plan to ensure the continued mobility of older people. Developing ways to keep older drivers on the road safely for as long as possible is crucial. This task includes (1) developing methods that improve older drivers' skills in ways that allow them to drive more safely, (2) modifying current vehicles to make the driving task less demanding, reduce crash risks, and improve crash outcomes, and (3) improving and enhancing the highway network and the ways in which vehicles interact with the highway system, through a variety of technological and communications improvements. Pedestrian facilities must be improved and enhanced using new design concepts and safer materials (to prevent falls, for example), active enforcement (preventing parked cars from blocking sidewalks), and careful maintenance (such as removing snow and wet leaves and fixing broken sidewalks). Additional funds will also be needed for a variety of public transit, community transport, and volunteer driver systems.

*Sandra Rosenbloom, Ph.D., is professor of planning and civil engineering, University of Arizona, Tempe (reprinted with permission)*