



2024 Needs Assessment Report

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AGE-FRIENDLY WAKE FOREST: NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT

by Ann Welton



INTRODUCTION

An age-friendly community is a place where people of all ages can live, work, and thrive in a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment. It promotes accessibility, safety, social engagement, and overall well-being. An age-friendly community also ensures that the needs of older residents are fully integrated into the fabric of the community so they can remain active, independent, and connected.

Along with the rest of the nation, the population in Wake Forest is aging. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2034 the nation will have more people aged 65 or older than under 18. In North Carolina, the population of individuals aged 65 and older will grow from 1.9 million to 2.8 million by 2042. In addition, the aging population is increasingly more active and independent, impacting how a city plans for and supports people as they age in place.

This demographic shift presents an opportunity for communities like Wake Forest. It has been documented that well-designed, age-friendly communities foster a strong economy and make for happier, healthier residents of all ages. Under the leadership of the Town's elected officials, staff, and committed residents, a movement is underway to ensure that our Town of Wake Forest is not only prepared for this demographic shift but embracing it.

The Town of Wake Forest is not acting alone. The State of North Carolina is working to respond to these evolving demographics and the complex challenges they present. To that end, in 2024, the state developed the All Ages, All Stages NC Multisector Plan for Aging (MPA) <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/all-ages-all-stages-nc-plan/open>.

Additionally, the Town of Wake Forest applied for and was accepted into the AARP network of Age-Friendly Communities, a consortium of over 940 cities, counties and states across the country. This five-year program is designed to help cities and towns become more age-friendly through policies, programs, and general awareness.

By taking advantage of the state's MPA framework and the resources provided by the AARP Age-Friendly Community Network, the Town of Wake Forest is positioning itself to address the multifaceted needs of older adults and residents of all ages.

PROJECT HISTORY

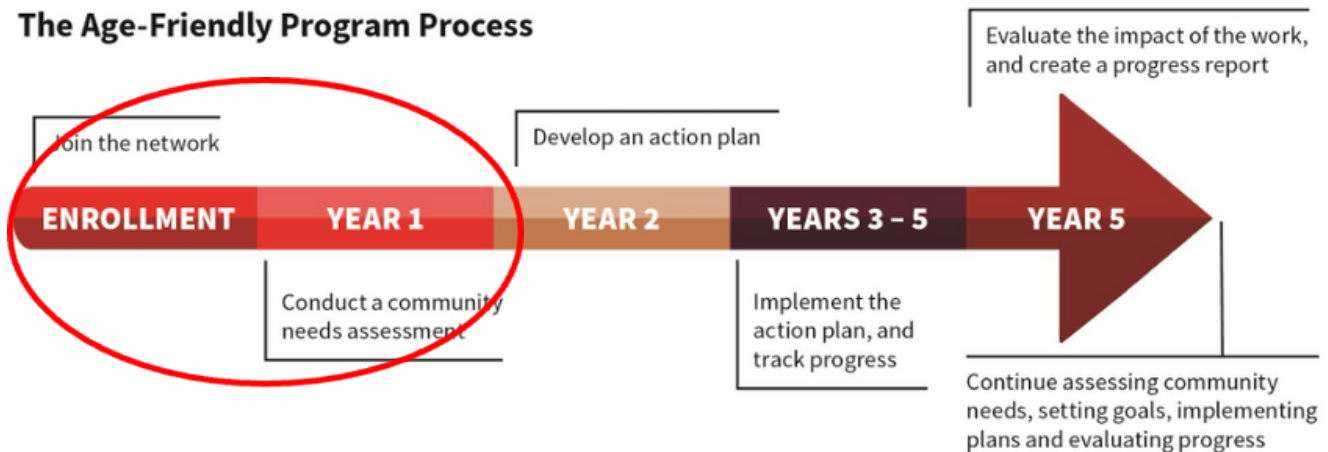
The Town of Wake Forest was officially accepted into the AARP Age-friendly community program in June 2024. In September 2024, an Age-Friendly Community Committee was established. Committee members were recruited to reflect the varying ages, ethnicities, and overall demographics found in the Town of Wake Forest. Committee members assisted in developing surveys, planning focus groups and listening sessions, reviewing information, as well as providing their own input and expertise.



The Age-Friendly program requires a “Community Needs Assessment” which was conducted from September 2024 through February 2025. The goal of the Needs Assessment is to determine to what extent The Town of Wake Forest excels at being age-friendly, and where it has opportunities to improve.

An Age-Friendly Community Survey (in both paper and digital versions) which was distributed widely for three months, receiving more than 1,200 responses. The survey data then helped to identify priorities listed in this plan and areas that required additional input to develop further recommendations. Three areas were identified as needing in-depth focus groups: Life for teens and tweens; Senior Services across a broad spectrum; and Caregiver support. Survey data, focus group responses, and committee members’ input were used to formulate this proposed Action Plan.

The Age-Friendly Program Process



8 DOMAINS OF LIVABILITY



This Needs Assessment for the Town of Wake Forest reflects the eight domains of livability, established by the AARP. All eight domains cannot be tackled at once, however keeping all of them front and center as we make plans and prioritize where to invest resources ensures that we are always looking at the entire scope of livability in the Town.

After conducting the Needs Assessment, Domains 4, 5, and 6 have been combined into one: Social Engagement. The domains are prioritized in this order:

1. Communication and Information
2. Health Services and Community Support
3. Transportation
4. Social Engagement
 - a. Civic Participation and Employment
 - b. Social Participation
 - c. Respect and Social Inclusion
5. Outdoor Spaces
6. Housing

Focus Area 1

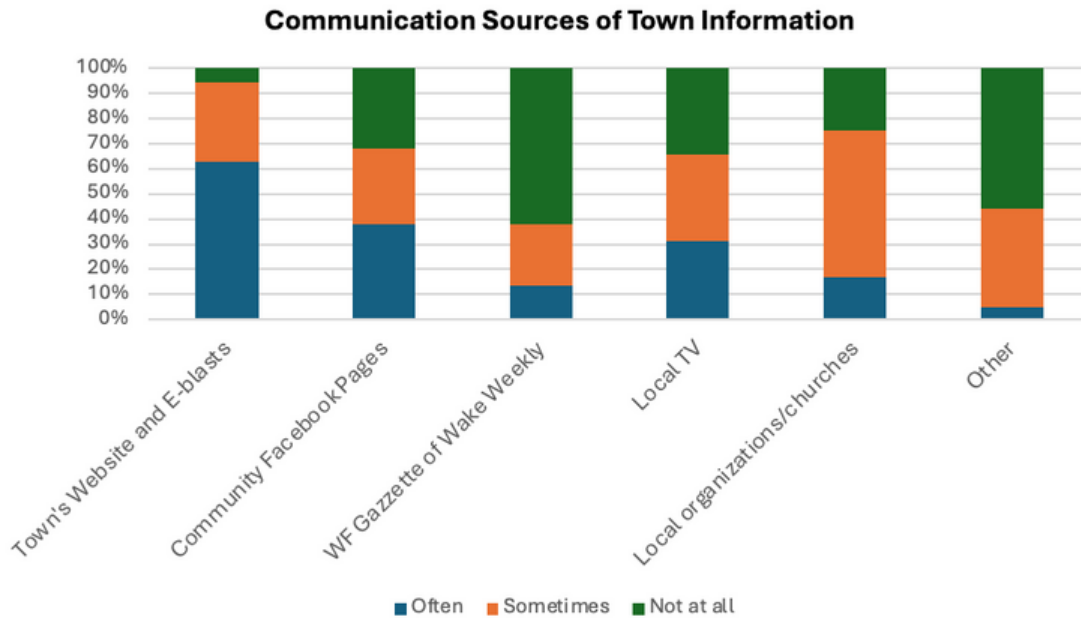
COMMUNICATION & INFORMATION

This domain is focused on how residents find out about programs, services and events, whether through communication from the Town of Wake Forest, local organizations, social media and other sources.

Desired Outcome:

Up-to-date information on programs, services, and events that is easily accessible in formats for all age groups.

Key Findings



Assets:

During the Needs Assessment phase of this project, it was noted by over 80% of survey responses that there was a good range of resources for information about services and events in town. Over 90% of those providing input said they used the town's communications channels, with almost 70% using faith organizations and social media (over 90% of those younger than 55 years old used social media regularly).

Focus groups also talked about the many different resources in the area to respond to the needs of aging adults, caregivers, and those with special needs in our community.



GAPS

Younger residents did not report experiencing a gap in information, however residents 55+ had a more difficult time finding the resources they needed. What is evident is the lack of a one-stop source for assisting seniors, caregivers and those with special needs to find the information they need - when they need it. For seniors, this included access to non-digital formats.

Another gap identified by the survey and focus group was information for seniors, delivered in person, on issues such as changes in financial and medical policies or how to avoid scams.

RECOMMENDATION 1A

Develop a Resource Guide for Senior Services available in Wake Forest and Wake County. Provide the Guide in digital form through the Town and local organizations as well as print copies in a limited number to distribute as needed.

RECOMMENDATION 1B

Maintain a centralized method of communication with Wake Forest residents.

- Establish an 800 number to get answers for all things related to Senior Services.
- Train Town of Wake Forest lobby volunteers (and others) to answer the 800 number calls, use the online resource, and direct callers to the appropriate services.
- Print brochures and magnets with the 800 number and brief explanation of the information that can be accessed. Distribute widely to Town and County facilities as well as every medical office in the area.
- Staff event booths at Town events and share information (FNOW, Forest Fest, WF Cares, etc.)
- Utilize Wake County's 211 information hotline.

RECOMMENDATION 1C

Establish biannual Scam Jams to alert the aging population about potential scams aimed at their demographic. Scam Jams can be used to kick off other programming geared towards helping aging adults manage their finances safely.

Focus Area 2

HEALTH SERVICES AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

This domain covers issues related to health and community services including primary healthcare, mental health and caregiving.

Desired Outcomes:

A community that helps caregivers of all kinds with navigating resources and providing respite opportunities and support groups.

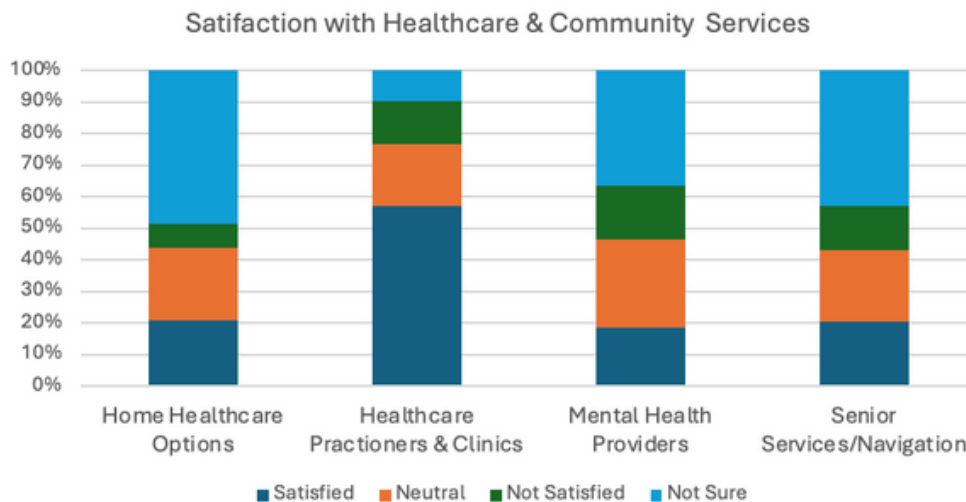
Enhanced access to mental health services for both children and adults.

Those serving as a caregiver, either for an aging parent, a spouse, or a child with disabilities face ongoing challenges. National studies show that one in five people identify as an unpaid caregiver. This statistic was consistent with the results of the Wake Forest Age-Friendly survey in which 22% of respondents reported that they were unpaid caregivers. As with Senior Services in general, resources for caregivers are available, but those who need them are often not aware.

There is a similar need for mental health services for all age groups. With suicides rates in youth continuing to rise, especially for youth of color, and social isolation increasing for seniors, access and affordability of mental health resources become increasingly important to a growing town like Wake Forest.

Key Assets:

For the most part, residents providing input into this project said that Wake Forest is well-served by primary care health providers. However, far fewer were satisfied with access to mental health or caregiver/senior services.





GAPS

Locally, major health systems like Duke and UNC Health have developed programs specifically to help caregivers navigate healthcare and social services. Yet, becoming a caregiver is often not by choice, but by necessity, therefore people don't know how or where to find help with these resources in a timely manner.

RECOMMENDATION 2A

Provide structured support for caregivers

- Establish quarterly Caregiver Resource Days at a Town Facility and promote attendance through a marketing campaign aimed at caregivers.
- Provide a safe space for those being cared for so the caregiver can participate in the sessions.
- Establish a network and support groups for caregivers.

RECOMMENDATION 2B

Provide resources for and information about healthy aging-in-place -- the ability to live in one's own home and community safely, independently, and comfortably, regardless of age, income, or ability level.

- Develop a series of educational sessions at the Center of Active Aging (Senior Center) about aging in place.
- Include information in the Senior Resource Guide.

RECOMMENDATION 2C

Promote health screening and provide educational programming that addresses chronic health conditions

- Promote regular health screenings, working with medical and other community-based partners to reach low-income and senior residents.
- Continue to support educational and fitness programs specifically focused on managing or preventing chronic health conditions such as diabetes and heart health.

RECOMMENDATION 2D

Provide better access to information and services surrounding mental health.

- Increase awareness for Veteran's services and the Mobile Crisis Unit.
- Promote community activities to enhance mental health, especially intergenerational events.

Focus Area 3

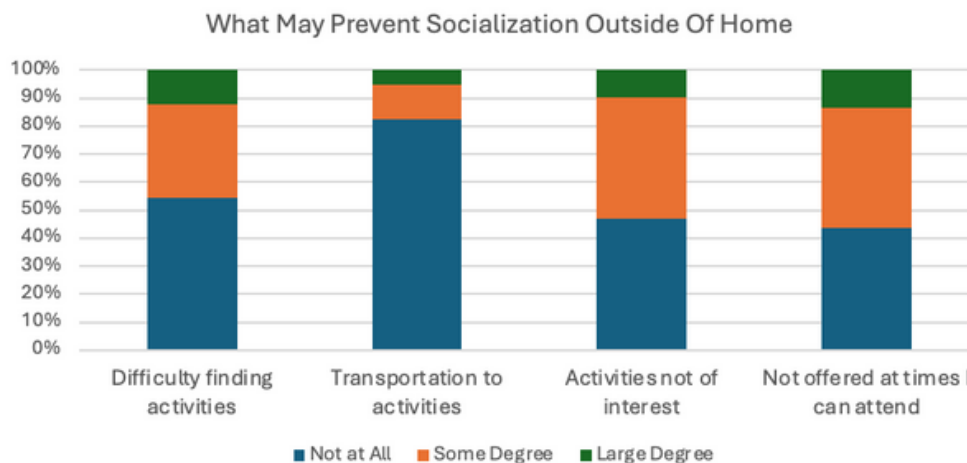
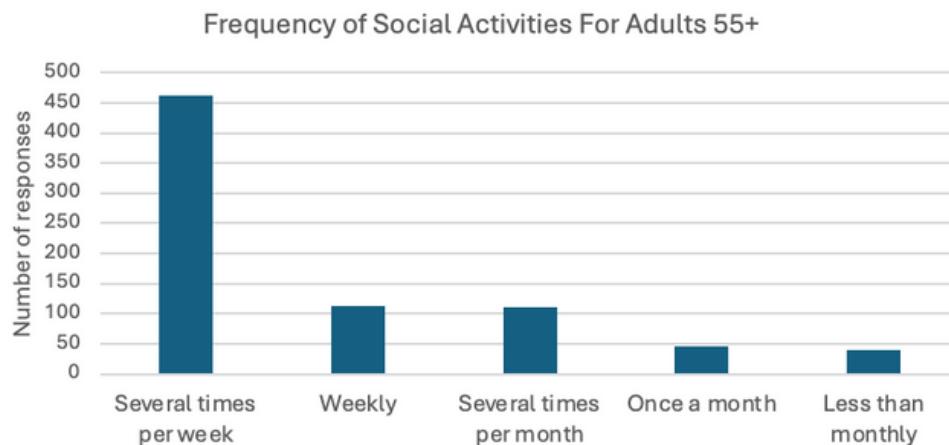
SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

This domain focuses on social participation and civic engagement that allows people to feel connected and contribute to their community. High levels of socialization are correlated with greater physical and mental health, especially among older adults, and help to create strong civic-minded communities.

Desired Outcome:

A community where social engagement is promoted and where intergenerational involvement is the norm, not the exception. From young families to the oldest of adults, residents socialize, volunteer, and share experiences with each other.

Key Findings





GAPS

RECOMMENDATION 3A

Create a page on the Town of Wake Forest website that houses volunteer opportunities across the Town including churches, non-profits, and schools. This single source will enhance the ability for youth and adults to find and access volunteer opportunities.

- Rely on the Town Communications Department to consistently promote the site in weekly newsletters. Highlight success stories using Town social media.
- Improve volunteer experiences by having periodic training for organizations on managing a volunteer program.

RECOMMENDATION 3B

Establish regular events and activities that bring together multiple generations to share experiences and build strong community connections.

- Fund and host regular intergenerational activities coordinated through a consortium of organizations such as the Center for Active Aging (Senior Center), the Renaissance Centre, mental health nonprofits and others. Work with schools to have students help plan and participate in these events.

RECOMMENDATION 3C

Create safe socialization opportunities for Tweens and Teens (ages 10-15).

- Host town dances or seasonal events several times per year for young teenagers to enjoy music and socialize in a safe, controlled environment. Provide food trucks and information on other youth events and youth resources.
- Encourage the Town of Wake Forest to actively pursue hosting state and regional youth sport or academic competitions.

Focus Area 4

TRANSPORTATION AND PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE

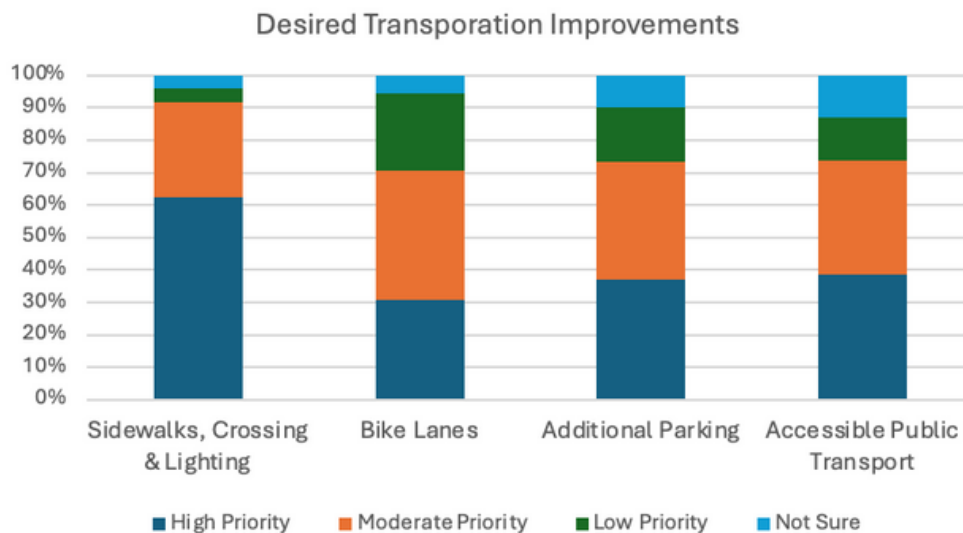
This domain focuses on how cities plan for and support multi-modal forms of transportation, including walkable and bikeable streets and affordable transportation alternatives to cars, especially for those with driving or mobility difficulties.

Desired Outcome:

A Town that promotes and encourages residents to use all modes of transportation by providing infrastructure that supports walking, biking and public transit options.

Key Findings:

Satisfaction with Wake Forest's transportation system was the lowest rated survey issue among all age groups. While the condition of the streets in Wake Forest was largely considered satisfactory, only 33% of survey respondents were satisfied with public transit and parking, and even fewer, 24%, were satisfied with pedestrian and bike access and safety. Written comments further noted that transportation infrastructure has not kept pace with the rapid rate of housing and commercial development, causing increased traffic delays.



When asked about street and transportation improvements, the highest priority was given to improving sidewalks and crossings, followed by accessible public transportation. Survey responses noted a lack of continuous sidewalks along main roads that connect residents to schools, downtown, and commercial areas, making it unsafe to walk or bike.

While many residents liked the new GoWake transit system, those with driving limitations often commented that the system was rarely available when they needed it, and requested several vehicles be set aside for seniors and those with disabilities.



GAPS

RECOMMENDATION 4A

Conduct pedestrian and bike audits to identify and prioritize areas for pedestrian and bicycle improvements.

RECOMMENDATION 4B

Improve access to transit for seniors and those with driving impairments.

- Evaluate options for designating specific GoWake vehicles for seniors and people with disabilities that limit their driving, ensuring these vehicles are handicapped accessible.

RECOMMENDATION 4C

Encourage the Town of Wake Forest to continue the adoption of the best national practices for safe streets such as those found in Complete Streets, a national smart growth initiative with over 1,700 jurisdictions.

- Ensure the Uniform Development Code (UDC) promotes complete sidewalks with continuous points of connection between areas of development.

Focus Area 5

OUTDOOR SPACES AND PUBLIC BUILDINGS

This domain focuses on parks, greenways, recreation facilities, and public buildings that provide options for exercising, socializing and learning new things.

Desired Outcome:

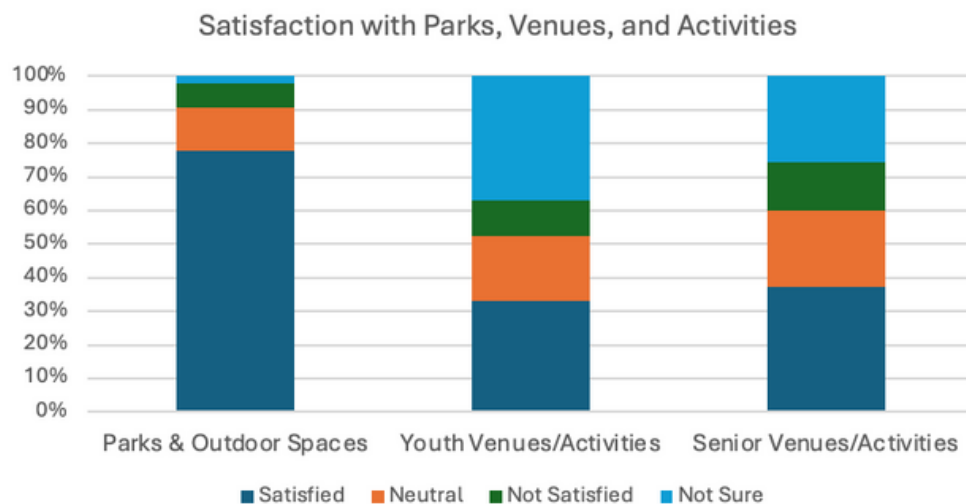
A community where parks, greenways, and outdoor meeting places are safe, clean, maintained, and enjoyed by all ages and demographic groups.

Key Findings

Survey respondents were overwhelmingly satisfied with the Town's outdoor spaces including parks and community centers.

Assets:

Wake Forest parks and community centers are well maintained and enjoyed year-round by residents.





GAPS

Capacity continues to be an issue. As the Town's population explodes, so does the need for recreational spaces, fields, courts, and community center space.

RECOMMENDATION 5A

Expand the existing or develop a second senior center.

- Expedite the assessment and planning of a new center.
- Utilize other town facilities to immediately expand class offerings and space for workshops, support groups, and informational sessions.

RECOMMENDATION 5B

Expand and improve the amenities in public spaces and recreation centers to serve all areas of the town and meet the demand of high-use activities.

- Provide additional benches and restrooms in parks and along greenways.
- Expand facilities and offerings for high-demand activities, especially those that serve a variety of age groups, such as pickleball, which is the fastest-growing sport for both youth and adults.

RECOMMENDATION 5C

Improve the quality of life through the addition of public art in all outdoor spaces and recreation centers, as well as throughout the Town.

Focus Area 6

HOUSING

This domain focuses on housing that provides options for those of different ages, is affordable for older adults and those on fixed incomes and is physically accessible to people with varying mobility levels or who wish to age in place.

Although more than a quarter of adults in the United States have some sort of disability only around 4 percent of national housing stock is accessible for those with moderate mobility difficulties, and less than 1 percent of housing units are fully wheelchair accessible. (National League of Cities)

Desired Outcome:

A community with housing options for people of different ages, incomes and mobility.



Key Findings

Most people participating in the needs assessment found the array of housing in Wake Forest adequate. However, they rated the affordability of housing and housing stock for seniors and those with disabilities very poorly.

The rate of development in Wake Forest has been rapid, and many people are now concerned about the additional traffic and perceived lack of supporting infrastructure.



GAPS

RECOMMENDATION 6A

Promote Assessor Dwelling Units (ADUs) to help address senior and affordable housing challenges. ADUs add to the housing supply without requiring large-scale construction projects.

RECOMMENDATION 6B

Promote the construction of universal-designed homes that allows people to live independently as long as possible. This includes no-step entry, one-story living, wide doorways and hallways, and spaces that can be easily modified as individuals age.

- Provide financial incentives to developers and builders for building universal-designed homes.

RECOMMENDATION 6C

Provide more options for independent and active older adults.

- Encourage the construction of smaller single-story homes, especially near retail and service amenities.
- Provide programs that assist older adults with home repairs and maintenance and the installation of emergency response systems, helping them stay in their homes longer.
- Work with community and faith-based organizations which are already undertaking efforts to create more affordable housing.

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WAKE FOREST

