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Public Forum

Transportation Options for Lafayette Seniors

Turning 70 was not something I was especially looking forward to in my life, but when it happened it was not an unpleasant event....that is, until I was notified by the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) that I could no longer renew my driver's license by mail. I had to make a personal visit to their office and take a written driver's test, and a vision test. It was then that I realized the possibilities of "what if I don't pass the test? If I lose my license I won't be able to drive anymore!"

Someday that could happen.

The timing of this awareness coincidentally came just as I was about to attend on November 9 a round table discussion on transportation options for Senior's who can no longer drive. It was facilitated by the Lafayette Senior Liaison Committee and included members of the Lafayette Senior Service's Commission, caretakers of seniors, transportation experts, and representatives from some of Lafayette's churches.

This discussion came as a result of the Lafayette Senior Liaison Committee Symposium of April 22, 2008 which focused on the most important issues facing our senior population. By far the most pressing need was for transportation options. Paul Branson, Chairperson of the County's Aging and Adult Services, and an experienced enthusiast for senior transportation, was the keynote speaker. He addressed the dilemma: we want our seniors to "age in place," but do not want them to drive when they can no longer drive safely. Giving up the car keys is often a traumatic situation, but

Mr. Branson pointed out that although it does mean a "change in life, it is not the end of life!" Since "mobility = independence," alternative transportation is essential.

Fortunately, there are options. For those that qualify under the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) there is the Link Paratransit provided by the County Connection Transit system. For those who are not ADA eligible there is the Lamorinda Spirit Van which takes people to lunch, shopping, and medical appointments. Senior Helpline Services also provides transportation for the basic needs of shopping and medical appointments with volunteer drivers using their own cars. The Yellow Cab and DeSoto Company provide a 20% discount for Lamorinda seniors. Often friendly neighbors help out. The idea of forming a coalition of all these resources was discussed. It would help in recruiting more volunteer drivers and perhaps allow the Spirit Van to be used by other organizations when it isn't making its usual rounds.

The DMV is very interested in keeping seniors driving for as long as possible if they can do so safely. In this effort they have created a Senior Ombudsman Program, which could serve as an older driver network for mobility management. A big obstacle is that when seniors give up driving many are not comfortable making the transition to other options such as using the Spirit Van. Taking a taxi seems so expensive even though it costs much less than owning a car. They also fear losing their flexibility -being able to go anywhere at any time without making appointments for rides.

Also discussed was the idea of having a "buddy program" in which a friendly person familiar with using the options could accompany first time users and alleviate their anxiety.

It is so important that all of us understand there are many options to driving one's own car. As Mary Bruns, Coordinator of the Lamorinda Spirit Van Program said, "People age when they stop doing things. When they take the van, they stay engaged in life."

Sandra A Smith

Lafayette Senior Liaison Committee and Lafayette Senior Services Commission

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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