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Aging and Equity in the Greater Portland Metropolitan Region

Alan DeLaTorre, Ph.D., and Margaret B. Neal, Ph.D.,
Institute on Aging, Portland State University

ABSTRACT

Aging and Equity in the Greater Portland Metropolitan Region discusses the opportunities and needs created by the increase in older adults in the region. The 65 and older population is expected to more than double over the next two decades, to over half a million people. Planning for the inevitable and unprecedented aging of our population provides an opportunity to improve our environments while becoming a leader in the push to create sustainable, equitable, and age-friendly communities.

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Aging and Equity in the Greater Portland Metropolitan Region

Alan DeLaTorre, Ph.D., and Margaret B. Neal, Ph.D.,
Institute on Aging, Portland State University

The populations of older adults in the greater Portland region, the state of Oregon, the United States, and the world as a whole will increase dramatically over the next several decades. Planning for the inevitable and unprecedented aging of our population will prepare us to better meet the needs of future generations, young and old. It is critically important that planners and policymakers address this unprecedented demographic shift and that communities consider ways to support aging individuals and their families. In order to work toward sustainable development – i.e., striving to balance the "three E's" of environment, social equity, and economy when considering the quality of life and well-being of current and future generations[i] – the aging of our region must be considered as a priority.

Aging in the Greater Portland Region

Our aging region provides us the perfect motivation to improve our environment while becoming a leader in the push to create sustainable, equitable, and age-friendly communities. The Portland-Vancouver region will witness a growth of its entire population, including the number and proportion of those aged 65 and older, from 2010-2030.[1] The region's population is expected to increase from 2,265,500 in 2010 to 3,050,100 in 2030, a growth of 34.6% over those two decades. The region's 65 and older population, however, is expected to more than double, from approximately 251,000 in 2010 (11.1% of the region's population) to 518,100 in 2030 (17.0%). This anticipated growth in the region's older adult population is expected to outpace both statewide and national trends, as demonstrated by the figures in **Table 1**.

1 The population characteristics reported in this paragraph are from Metro's (2009) population forecasts for the Portland-Vancouver Metropolitan Statistical Area.

TABLE 1

Number, Proportion, and Growth Rates of People Aged 65 and Older			
Category	United States	Oregon	Portland - Vancouver Metropolitan Statistical Area
Number of persons aged 65+ in 2010	40,267,984	533,533	251,000
Number of persons aged 65+ in 2030	72,092,000	881,957	518,100
Growth rate in number of persons aged 65+ from 2010 to 2030	79.0%	65.3%	106.4%
Proportion of persons aged 65+ in 2010	13.0%	13.9%	11.1%
Proportion of persons aged 65+ in 2030	19.3%	18.2%	17.0%
Growth rate in proportion of persons aged 65+ from 2010 to 2030	48.0%	31.0%	53.3%

Equity Considerations Affecting the Aging Population

Analyses of equity conditions typically focus on our region's most vulnerable residents. Older adults can be viewed as a vulnerable population because of some members' greater likelihood to be living in poverty, to be socially isolated, to experience mobility limitations and other disabling conditions, and to have increased medical needs.

As the region's population ages, the older adult population will also become more racially and ethnically diverse and may be affected by increasing income disparities – both of which are likely to increase the vulnerability of our older adult population. From 2010 to 2050 the proportion of non-Hispanic white persons aged 65 and older in the U.S. will drop from 80% to 58%, while all other race categories will increase.[ii] Although overall poverty rates among older adults are considerably lower than in years past due to Social Security, Medicare, and Older Americans Act programs, high poverty rates persist among certain sub-populations of older adults, including racial and ethnic minorities, women, and the oldest old. Proposed reforms to the Social Security system (e.g., reduced cost-of-living adjustments, raised eligibility ages) and to Medicare, along with increasing income disparities within the older adult population, are likely to exacerbate the overall rates of poverty of many older adults over the upcoming decades.

Geographic Patterns of Aging within the Region

Our regional population is not aging uniformly. Spatial analyses can be very useful for observing patterns and for guiding future policy and program decisions. For example, changing patterns in the proportion of older adults by census tract can be seen by highlighting changes in tracts over 10-year periods from 1990-2000 (**Figure 1**) and 2000-2010 (**Figure 2**). As Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate, the greatest growth in the region's older adult population over the past 20 years has been in areas away from the urban core and toward the suburban

and exurban periphery. The primary exception to this pattern is in newly developed urban Portland neighborhoods such as the Pearl District and South Waterfront, which have seen notable increases in the proportion of their populations that are older adults over the past ten years.

Figure 3 shows where older adults are concentrated within the region in 2010. The map highlights census tracts that had an above-average proportion of those aged 65 and older. Although there are some close-in areas with higher-than-average proportions of this population, it is evident that older adults disproportionately live outside of Multnomah County, in suburban and exurban areas of Clackamas, Washington, and Clark counties. This points to the need for these areas, too, to have age-friendly features in their built, social, and service environments. Looking into the future, it is important that locational patterns of older adults within the region (and those moving here from outside the region) are tracked in order to plan for and develop appropriate services and amenities that both meet the needs of older adults and take advantage of the skills, experience, and talents that older adults have to offer.

Additional data helpful in planning for an aging population include the level of density of people aged 65 and older. These data can be viewed in combination with other indicators to understand where older adults are concentrated in comparison to the presence or absence of age-friendly infrastructure, organizations, and services. **Figure 4** shows concentrations of older people in certain areas of the region, including the central city (e.g., Pearl District, South Waterfront), East Vancouver, and King City.

Percent Change in Persons Aged 65 or Older, by Census Tract

Figure 1

1990 - 2000
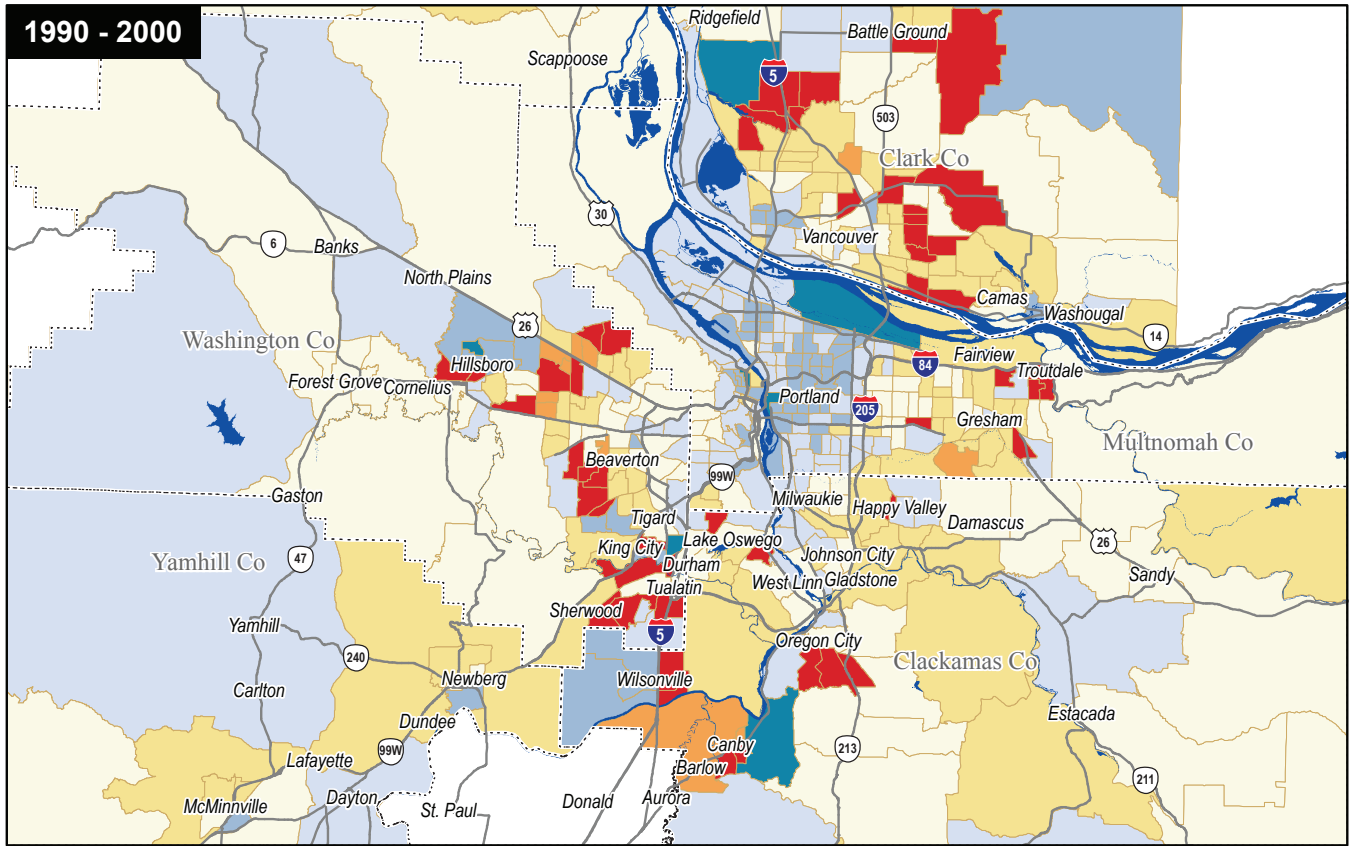
Less than -50%	-49% to -50%	-24% to 0	1% to 25%	26% to 75%	76% to 100%	More than 100%

Figure 2

2000 - 2010

3
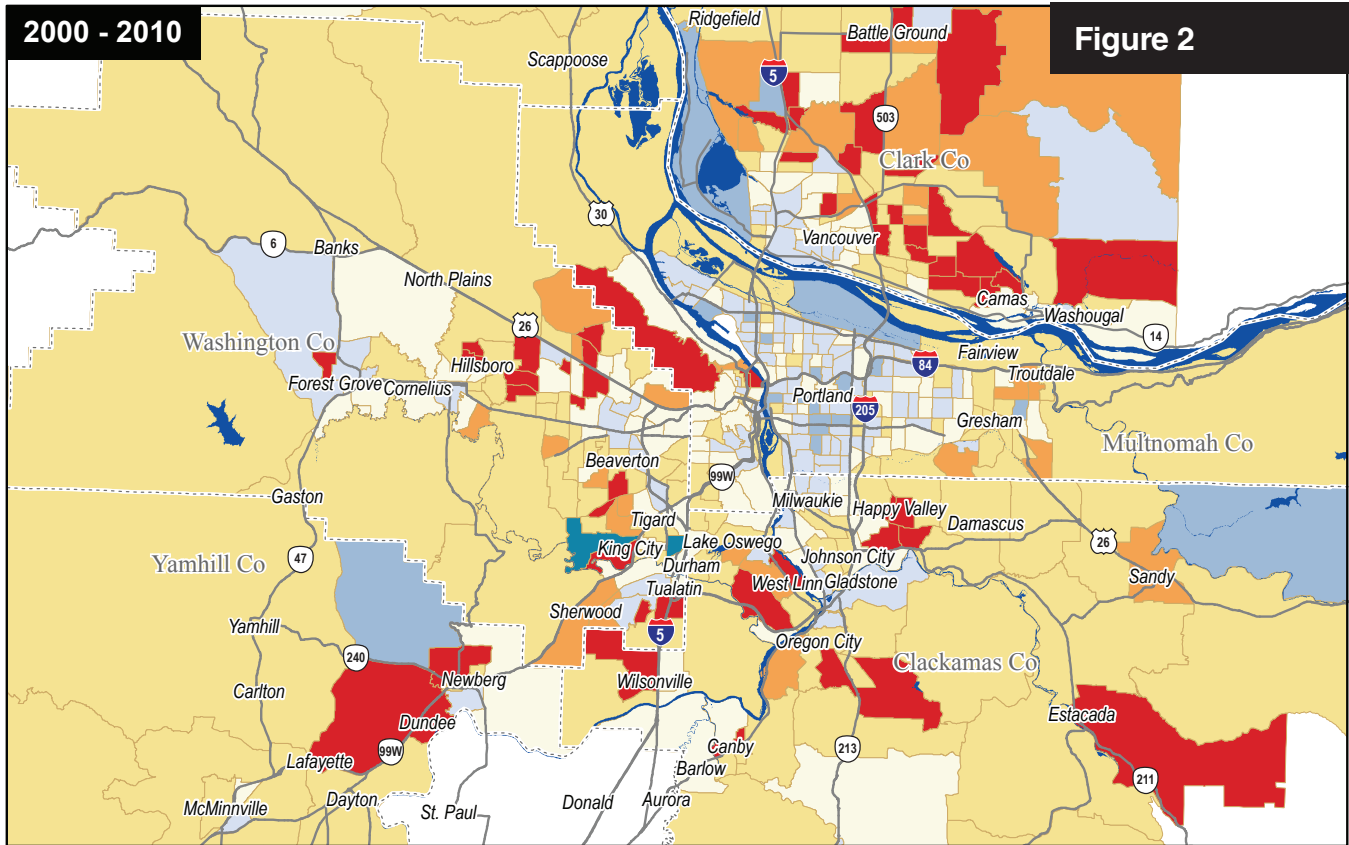
Figure 3

Census Tracts with Above Regional Average Percent of those Aged 65 and Older in 2010

Above regional average % seniors (ages 65+) [Tracts]

- [ ] Below 10.76%
- [■] Above 10.76%

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5 Miles
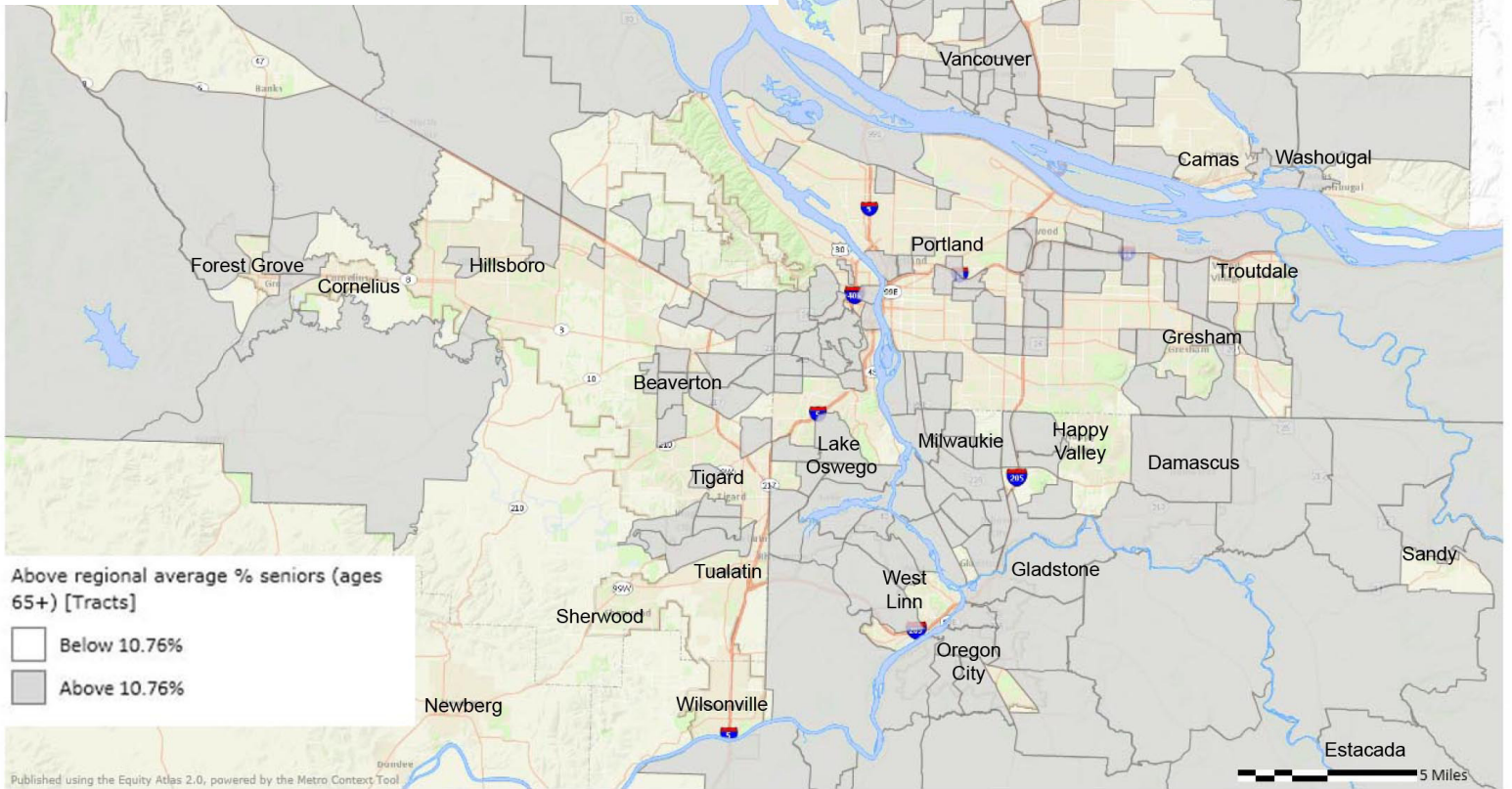
Figure 4

Density of Population Aged 65 and Older in 2010

DENSITY

Low | Medium | High
1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5

PROXIMITY (miles)

Published using the Equity Atlas 2.0, powered by the Metro Context Tool

5 Miles
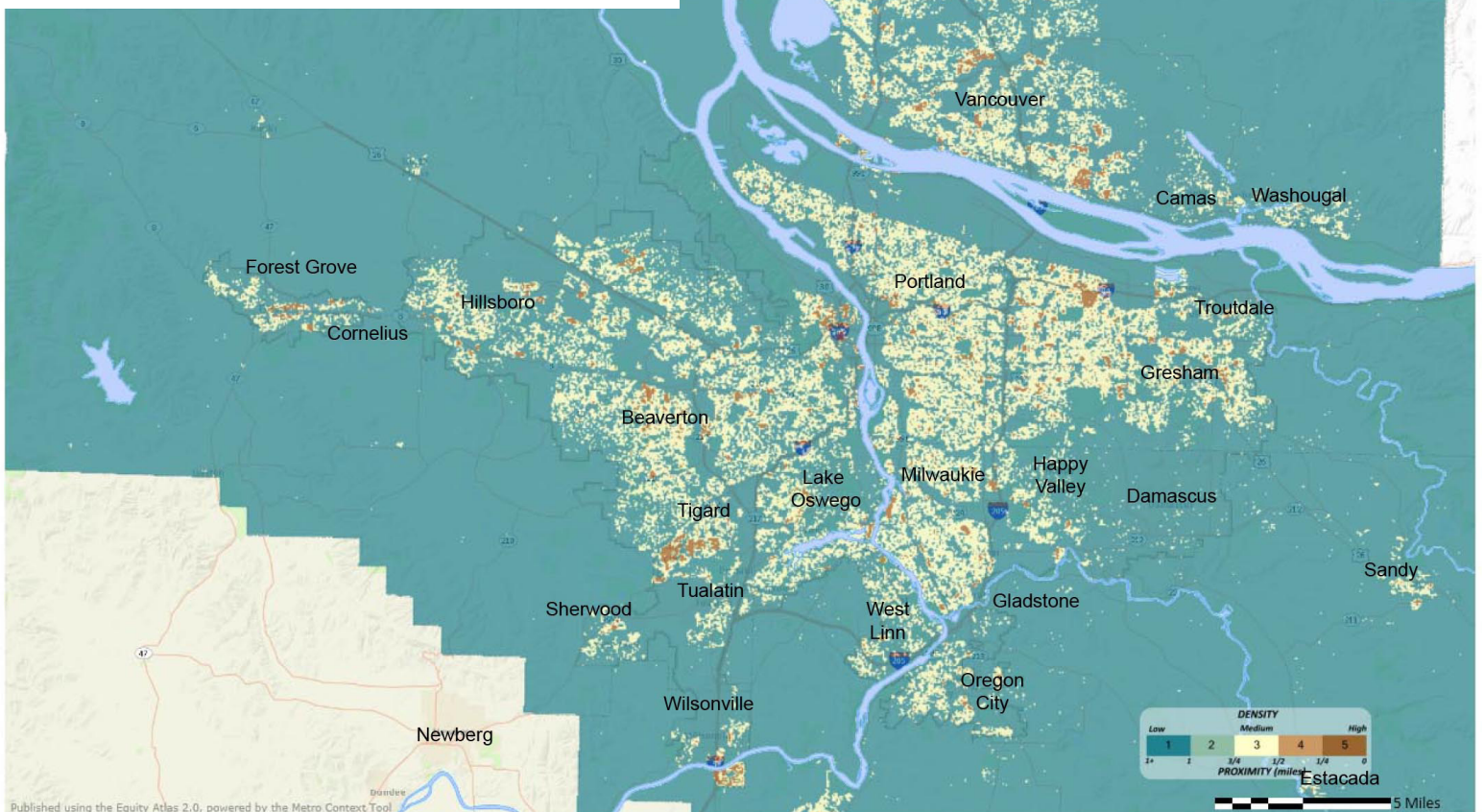
Age-Friendly Communities and Active Aging

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2007)[iii] defines an age-friendly community as one that "emphasizes enablement rather than disablement" and is "friendly for all ages and not just 'elder-friendly'". Although many ongoing services and programs in the region already benefit older adults (e.g., transit and paratransit services, information hotlines, urban and regional planning efforts) there remains a need for improving and refining our approaches, programs, planning efforts, and policies to better address the unprecedented opportunity and challenge of the aging of our population. Specifically, the WHO has developed an active aging framework focused on addressing the physical environment as well as the social, economic, personal, behavioral, and health and social service determinants of active aging, which is defined as "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age".[iv] This framework looks toward policy changes and refining programs and services to better meet the needs and utilize the skills and talents of older adults. In fostering active and age-friendly communities, the WHO posits that improved environments for older adults will also benefit younger generations, families with children, people with disabilities, and others across the age and ability spectrum. This framework is particularly valuable as it urges planners and policymakers to look beyond merely focusing on the needs and deficiencies associated with aging, instead attempting to also consider available opportunities that exist as a result of a changing age structure.

Efforts to Increase the Region's Age Friendliness

Several efforts have been undertaken in the recent past to create an "age-friendly" region.[v] For example, Elders in Action, a non-profit organization focused on assuring a vibrant community through the active involvement of older adults in the tri-county region (Clackamas, Multnomah, and Washington), informs local government policy decisions and administers an age-friendly business certification program that educates and helps businesses better serve their older customers.

AARP Oregon has supported the development of livable communities while engaging volunteers in issues related to health care, Social Security, and, most recently, furthering efforts that improve the age friendliness of cities. The national AARP Public Policy Institute has also conducted important research and offered wide-ranging policy analysis in areas that are considered to affect a community's age friendliness (e.g., transportation, health policy, and employment).

Government agencies have also begun focusing on the implications of population aging. In 2006, Metro funded a multidisciplinary project by Portland State University's (PSU) College of Urban and Public Affairs to examine age-related shifts in housing and transportation demand.[vi] In late 2006, PSU's Institute on Aging was asked to conduct research on Portland's age friendliness as part of the WHO's Global Age-Friendly Cities project.[vii] In 2010, the WHO initiated its Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities, and Portland was accepted as one of the pioneer members. Since that time, the Age-Friendly Portland Advisory Council, coordinated by PSU's Institute on Aging, has developed an Action Plan for an Age-Friendly Portland that was presented to the City Council on October 16, 2013.[viii] The Plan was unanimously approved by resolution, and implementation efforts are underway.

Several county-led efforts have also emerged and deserve recognition. Multnomah County's Task Force on Vital Aging (2007)[ix] was charged with assessing and identifying new opportunities, best practices, barriers and recommendations for enhancing the independence, engagement, and contributions of older adults in Multnomah County and our region. Clackamas County's Social Services Division partnered with Oregon State University's Extension Service and AARP Oregon in 2011 to explore aging-related issues to make Clackamas County an age-friendly place that supports people's ability to age actively.[x] Clark County's Department of Community Planning and the Board of Clark County Commissioners appointed a task force and engaged community stakeholders in creating an

Aging Readiness Plan.[xi] Washington County's Disability, Aging and Veteran Services is currently working with the Vision Action Network, local communities, and the public to write a three-year strategic plan that will improve service delivery systems in partnership with cities and stakeholders in order to address the aging of the county's population.[xii]

Creating a Sustainable, Equitable, and Age-Friendly Region

If we are to strive for equity in our region as it ages, we must take into consideration the three major components of sustainable development as they pertain to our future age structure: environmental equity, social equity, and economic equity. These three tenets are integral to the age-friendly efforts of the WHO, the Portland region, and the 145+ cities and communities across 22 countries worldwide, as well as 11 affiliated programs that are members of the WHO's Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities (these numbers continue to grow, along with numerous related but non-WHO initiatives in other cities and regions). These efforts are aimed at having well-designed community amenities and infrastructure that enable and engage, rather than disable and isolate, older adults. These features are seen as necessary if we are to tap into the vast potential held by our older adult population.

Informed policy decisions that consider age friendliness are expected to lead to wiser and more sustainable investments and growth, including improved social and environmental outcomes. The WHO's (2007) age-friendly framework consists of eight domains: housing, transportation, outdoor spaces and buildings, respect and social inclusion, social participation, communication and information, civic participation and employment, and community support and health services. Portland is using 10 domains for its Action Plan rather than the WHO's eight original domains. The civic participation and employment domain has been changed into two

domains: (1) civic participation and volunteering, and (2) employment and economic development. The community support and health services domain was separated into two domains: (1) community services, and (2) health services.[2] **Table 2** shows the three sustainability domains as they correspond to the age-friendly domains. The remainder of this paper identifies particular areas that communities, leaders, and policymakers should focus on to make the Portland metro area a more equitable, age-friendly region.
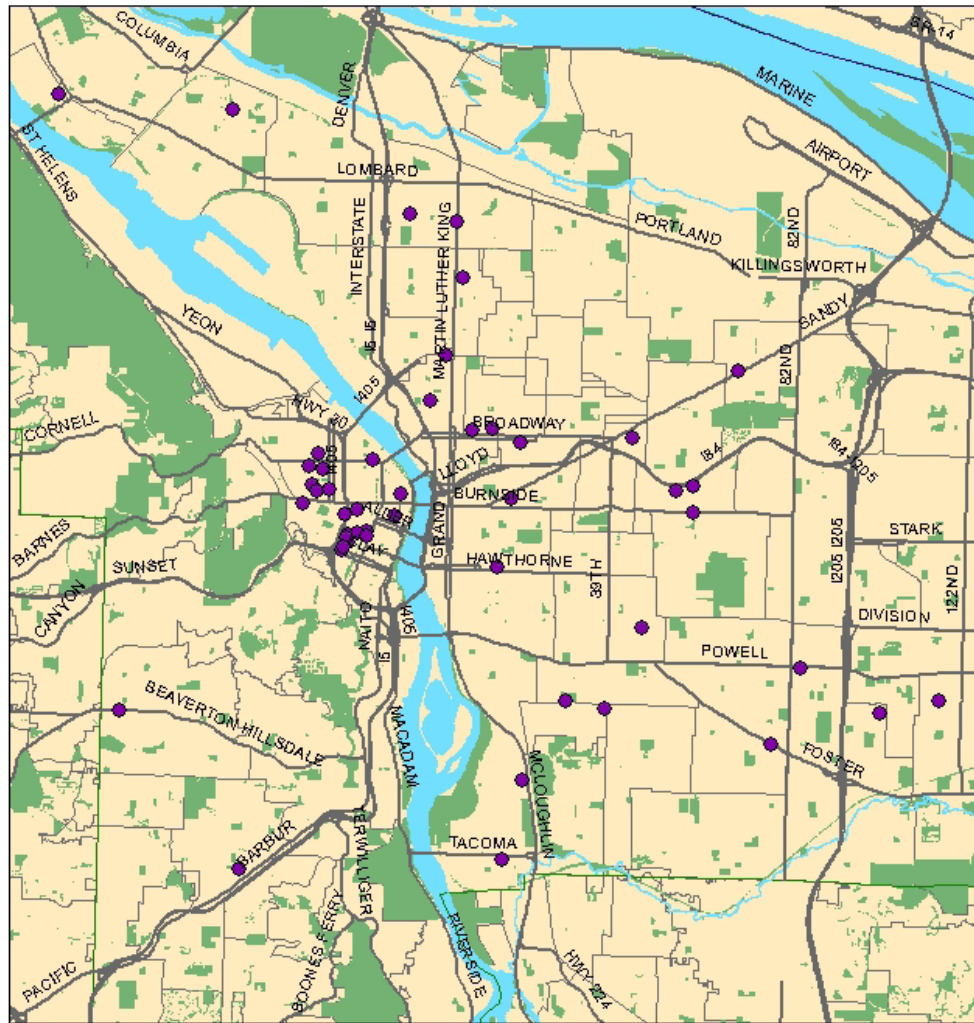
TABLE 2

Elements of Sustainable Development and Age-Friendly Communities*

Sustainability Domains	Age-Friendly Domains
Environmental Equity	• Housing • Transportation • Outdoor Spaces and Buildings
Social Equity	• Respect and Social Inclusion • Social Participation • Civic Participation and Volunteering • Communication and Information • Community Services • Health Services
Economic Equity	• Employment and Economic Development

It should be noted that elements of sustainability and age-friendly domains cross over with one another. For instance, environmental domains such as housing and transportation also have social equity implications. Although this can create a lack of clarity, it reflects the complicated nature of policy and program creation and implementation.

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2 The decision to expand from eight to 10 domains was made by the Age-Friendly Portland Advisory Council and was approved by City Council in October, 2013. Volunteering and economic development have been added as they were identified as opportunities that are emerging with the increasing number of older adults. Health and community services were both considered to be important areas that deserved individual attention based on the large number of services that are provided in the public, nonprofit, and for-profit sectors.

Figure 5

Independent and Affordable Housing for Older Adults - Portland, OR

Housing

Housing the region's aging population is a critical component in creating equitable, age-friendly environments. Our region must offer a range of housing options that provide a diverse population of older adults access to a continuum of housing that meets their needs, preferences, and abilities. Housing types required include completely independent age-integrated houses, apartments, or condominiums, age-segregated retirement communities, adult foster homes, assisted living facilities, memory-care facilities, and nursing homes. The region's housing options must also meet a range of income levels, from subsidized public housing and affordable housing for those above the poverty line to well-designed market rate housing. The region varies with respect to the existing location of the various types of housing options for older adults and should be studied in more detail to determine where inequities exist and how appropriate policy and program responses should be carried out. To illustrate, **Figure 5** shows the locations of independent and affordable housing for older adults in Portland.[xiii] This information could also be examined jointly with the density of older adults by acre, which would highlight where older adults are concentrated in comparison to available housing options.

Another aspect of housing for an aging region to consider is whether the housing stock has the ability to accommodate changes that occur over the life course. Although some older adults live in housing designed specifically to meet their needs (e.g., long-term care facilities), the majority of older adults live in single-family homes and multi-family developments that are not designed to meet changing physical needs. Housing design must go beyond minimum levels of required accessibility if housing is to be accessible for the burgeoning number of older adults. One proxy measure that can be used to estimate whether existing housing units may be able to meet the needs of an aging population is whether the unit has a single story.

Although this measure is imperfect (e.g., a single-story unit can still have stairs or be unable to be adapted for accessible use), it provides one indicator of the potential for accessibility. Multi-story housing requires an elevator in order to be accessible for some older adults and people with disabilities. Once again, while not perfect, whether or not an elevator is available provides a measure of possible accessibility of the housing unit. **Figure 6** shows that the western and southwestern portions of the region have lower densities of single-story housing and buildings with elevators, as compared to the eastern part of the region (e.g., Clackamas County and the eastern portion of Portland) and Clark County/Vancouver.

Figure 6

Density of Single Story Housing and Elevator Buildings as a Proxy for Accessibility
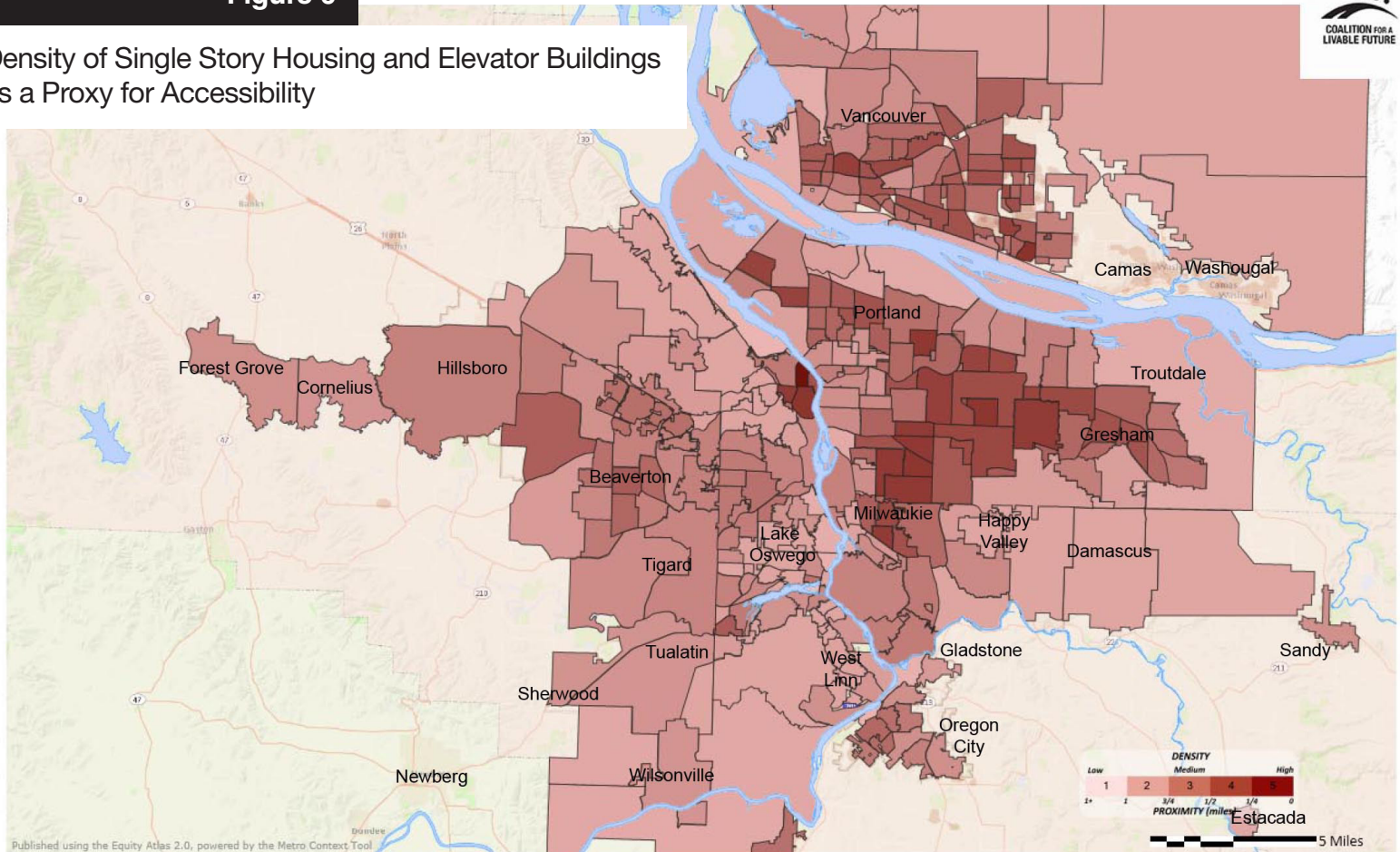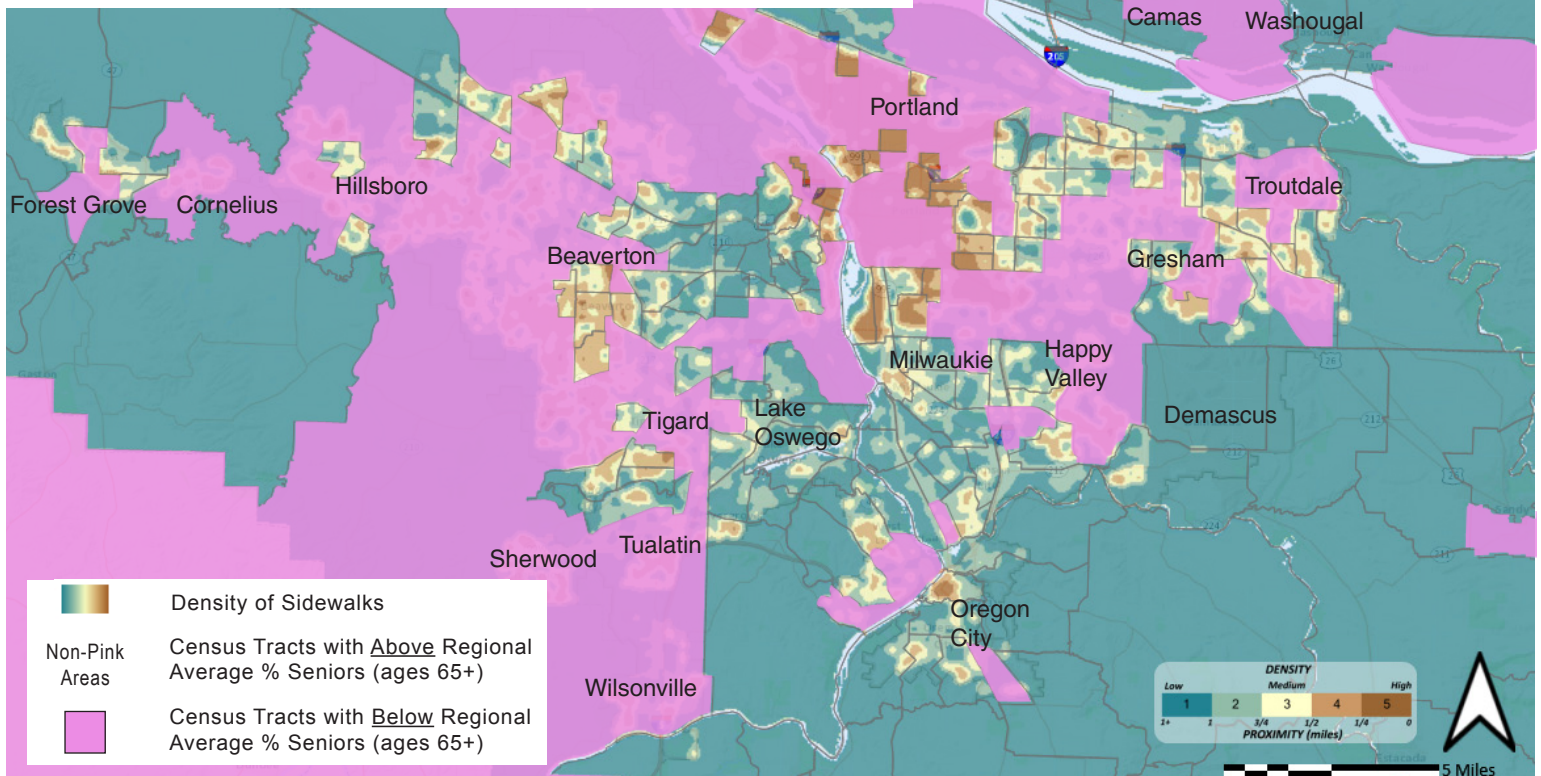
Figure 7

Density of Sidewalks in Relation to Census Tracts with Above Regional Average Percent of those Aged 65 and Older in 2010

Density of Sidewalks

Non-Pink Areas — Census Tracts with Above Regional Average % Seniors (ages 65+)

Census Tracts with Below Regional Average % Seniors (ages 65+)

Transportation

To support an age-friendly region, transportation options should facilitate mobility and increase access to essential resources and opportunities. Local active transportation policy and planning efforts should incorporate an emphasis on enhanced accessibility for a range of users. This includes planning and development of physically accessible public infrastructure that facilitates mobility and enhances feelings of safety, security, and inclusion. In particular, in addition to transportation modalities themselves being accessible, they should facilitate access to essential resources (e.g. grocery stores, medical care), social connections (e.g., volunteer and educational opportunities), and economic activities (e.g., convenient access to employment, businesses, and services).

Two measures of age friendliness with respect to transportation in the region are sidewalk density (which supports walkability) and transit access. **Figure 7** shows sidewalk density in the region, highlighting census tracts with above-average proportions of older adults.

Figure 8 shows access to transit as measured by proximity to transit stops (and frequency of rides through those stops) in comparison to census tracts with above-average proportions of older adults. Taken together, **Figures 7 and 8** suggest a significant disconnect between the areas of the region with above-average populations of older adults and the areas with the best access to transit and sidewalks. Older adults living in the suburban and exurban parts of the region, in particular, have less access to these important amenities.

Figure 8

Transit Access in Relation to Census Tracts with Above Regional Average Percent of those Aged 65 and Older in 2010

Legend:
Transit Access
Non-Pink Areas — Census Tracts with Above Regional Average % Seniors (ages 65+)
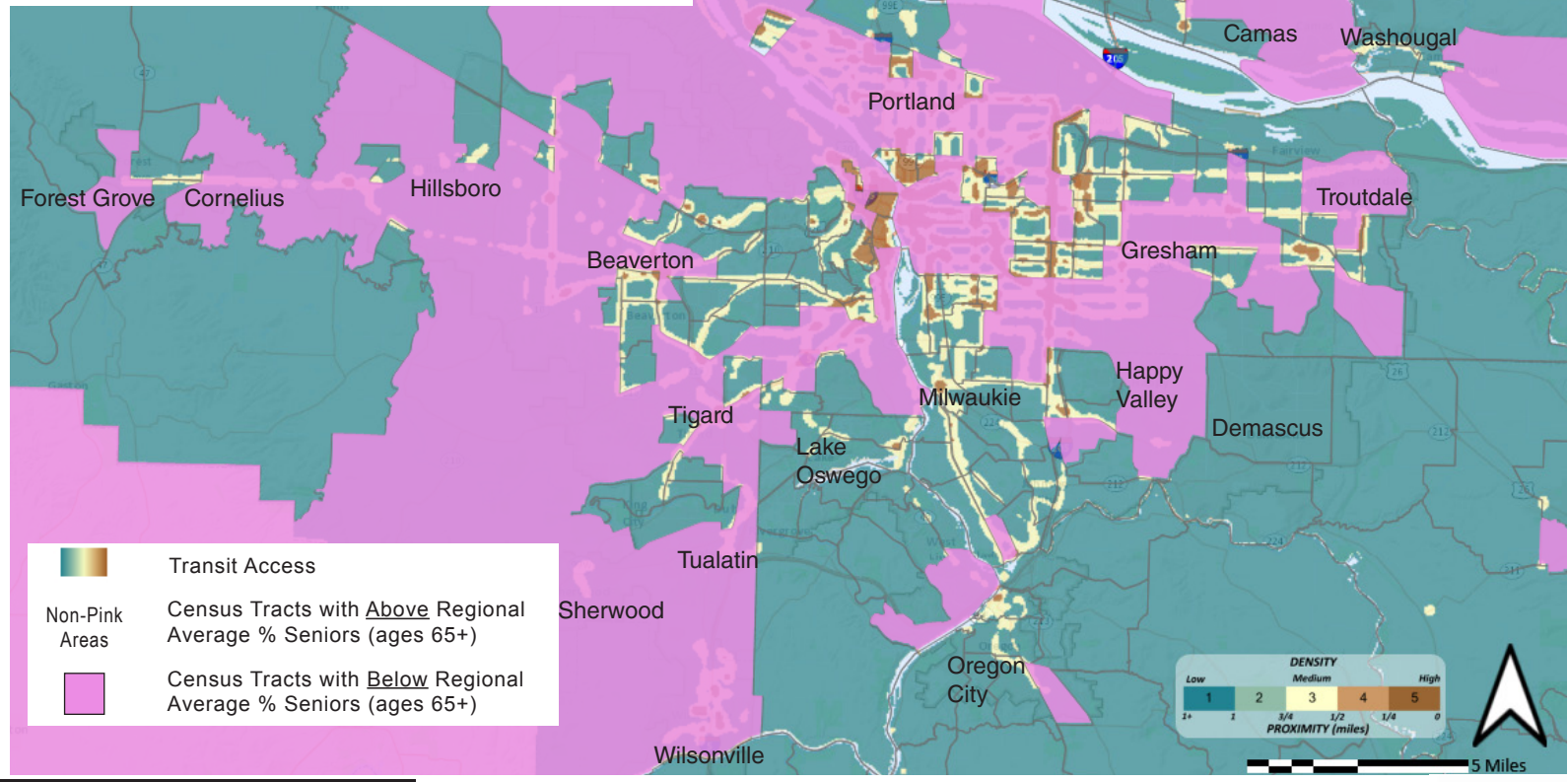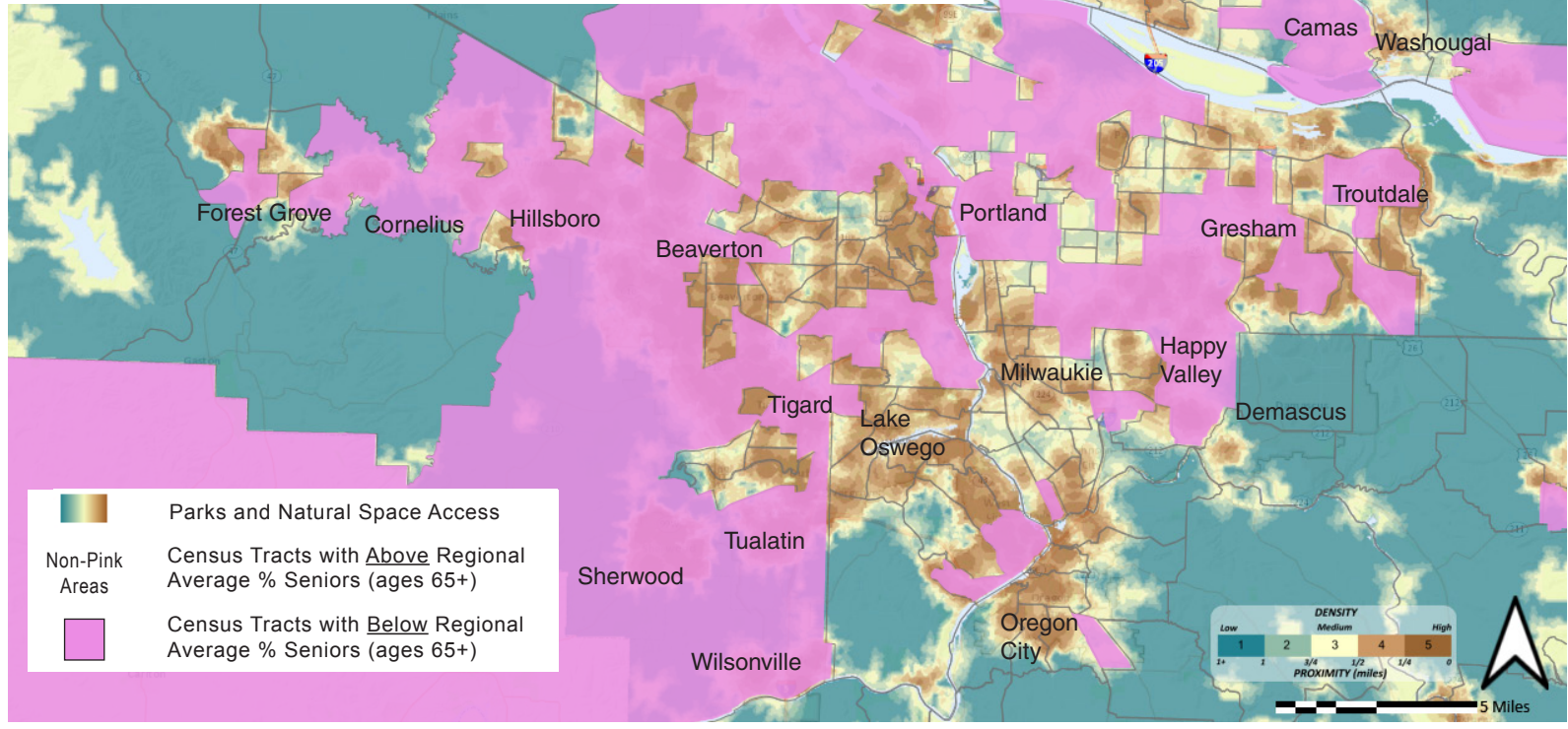Pink — Census Tracts with Below Regional Average % Seniors (ages 65+)

Figure 9

Access to Parks and Natural Spaces in Relation to Census Tracts with Above Regional Average Percent of those Aged 65 and Older in 2010

Legend:
Parks and Natural Space Access
Non-Pink Areas — Census Tracts with Above Regional Average % Seniors (ages 65+)
Pink — Census Tracts with Below Regional Average % Seniors (ages 65+)

Outdoor Spaces and Buildings

Access to age-friendly outdoor spaces is important to older adults for a number of reasons, including facilitating the ability to socialize and to reap the health benefits of being active. The design, operation, and maintenance of parks, public buildings, and urban spaces need to be carried out with the goals of being more accessible, inclusive, and enabling for older adults. Improving aspects of the built environment can facilitate easier way-finding, usability, and, in some cases, may even assist in individuals' rehabilitation efforts. To be age friendly, the design of public buildings and outdoor spaces requires careful attention to incorporating aspects of universal design (i.e., design that is usable by all users, regardless of age or ability) and going beyond minimum accessibility requirements. Furthermore, public and private design processes should increase opportunities for collaboration between experts and end users in an effort to foster innovative solutions.

Figure 9 shows the presence of parks and natural areas highlighting the census tracts with above-average proportions of older adults. This provides one indication of older adults' proximity to sources of green space and outdoor recreation. To truly understand how well older adults can access these resources however, we would also need to know whether these green spaces have physical accessibility features, such as paved trails and other amenities such as security lighting and restrooms that meet accessibility specifications.

Social Equity

Respect and social inclusion, social participation, civic participation and volunteering, access to communication and information, and community and health services are all components of social equity and are critically important in creating a region that utilizes the assets of people of all ages and abilities. Research is needed to better understand the social aspects of older adults' lives, including exploring differences across cultures and socioeconomic groups. However,

tracking this information is difficult, as little existing spatial and/or quantitative data are available, and original data collection is costly and time consuming.

Social Participation, Respect, and Social Inclusion

With age there are normal changes in individuals' functional abilities that families and communities should understand. Aging, illness, and disability all continue to carry stigma, and communities will benefit from knowing how to be inclusive and respectful and honor the contributions of older adults. Building strong and resilient communities requires stemming social isolation and disenfranchisement, as well as paying particular attention to engaging older adults from diverse backgrounds. Social opportunities exist in the region for lifelong education, recreation, and leisure, and these need to be accessible to all older adults in the region.

Civic Participation and Volunteering

An aging population represents a rare natural resource that is growing. Older adults can be utilized as resources by envisioning and shaping opportunities for their participation in civic and community processes, as well as volunteering. Neighborhoods vary in their organizational structure (e.g., neighborhood associations, community organizations) and their rates of resident participation. Patterns can and should be examined to identify opportunities and barriers to engagement for older adults including how to best engage older adults in community events (e.g., accessible public meetings, communication).

Communication and Information

The "digital divide" disproportionately impacts older adults, with younger generations often more comfortable than older ones with technologies such as computers, cell phones, and social media. Although this divide will likely diminish over time, and although many older adults already are quite capable of accessing and conveying information electronically, it is important that we consider the ramifications of depending too heavily on digital means of communication at this

time. Groups without ready access to computers, for example, or who communicate best in a language other than English, must be taken into account. Regardless of the medium, we need to provide information to people in an accessible fashion (e.g., large fonts, well lit, good contrast) that is integrated into our regional infrastructure (e.g., road signs, addresses, pedestrian information). The type and design of media and the technology used can make daily life easier or more difficult. Moreover, having a variety of means and types of communication is critical in the event of an emergency.

Community and Health Services

Services that are provided by the public, nonprofit, and for-profit sectors provide support for the day-to-day lives of people of all generations. Additionally, preparing to meet the needs of older adults in case of an emergency is critical for communities. It is also important to ensure quality access to grocery stores, retail areas, cultural amenities, arts and cultural activities, and civic services, which are all important to older adults. In fact, people with limited mobility are likely to find having such services in close proximity of particular benefit. Community-driven efforts will also be important to complement public and private services available. Access to health services is also integral to the age friendliness of the region, including access to hospitals, clinics, and other places that affect an individual's ability to age in a healthy and active manner. Recent changes in health care policies and advances in medical and assistive technologies have the ability to improve the quality of life and well-being of our aging population.

Employment and the Economy

Sustainable development is a topic that is of interest to researchers and policymakers, as well as the business community. The "triple bottom line" of sustainability – people, planet, and profit[xiv] – is an important principle that has implications for economic development and business discourse, and the triple bottom line also matters with respect to

age-friendly communities. An age-friendly region must support the ability of our aging population to access employment opportunities while overcoming ageism and other barriers to employment for older adults. In fact, age-friendly businesses are good for people of all ages, and employing older adults offers benefits that employers would do well to understand (e.g., greater worker productivity levels). The aging of our population can also be viewed strategically as a vehicle for broader economic growth. In fact, older adults engage frequently in entrepreneurial activities,[xv] and the Portland region is a destination for highly-educated migrants aged 40 and older.[xvi] Another strong possibility for economic growth is cultivating age-friendly tourism. By making improvements in physical accessibility, our region could increase its attractiveness as a tourist destination while at the same time strengthening age-friendly infrastructure and services that will serve our local population.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Efforts are under way to create a more age-friendly Portland and region in order to prepare for the population's changing age structure. To succeed, a proactive approach to aging is required that will cultivate available assets and create opportunities, rather than focusing on the challenges and merely reacting to needs and emerging issues. This intricate balance between addressing needs and maximizing strengths will need to be negotiated and renegotiated as circumstances change.

Much remains to be done. It is important to understand how equitable our region is and where inequities exist. Older adults throughout the region, regardless of location, income level, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religion, deserve an opportunity to obtain a high quality of life. Ideally, the greater Portland region can create cities and communities that optimize the aging experience and facilitate active aging. The physical, social, and service environments all must be improved to be made more age friendly. Older adults must be integrally involved

in decision making, research must be translated into practice, and indicators and benchmarks for success must be set and monitored. Only then will our region lead the way toward sustainable, equitable, and age-friendly communities. Moving forward, it is critically important that we understand the changing needs and inequities among our population and, at the same time, continue to look for opportunities that are emerging from the aging of our region.

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