

Rezoning for Renewal: Challenges of Retrofitting Downtown

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As part of the Aging in Place track at the recent APA National Planning Conference, planners and experts met to discuss the challenges of retrofitting decaying downtowns in relation to the needs of seniors.

One feature of good senior housing is physical access. While multi-story units can be accessed with elevators, they are a significant financial investment, and may be difficult to achieve in retrofits. As our existing housing stock is largely inaccessible, we must be creative with our options. We can provide relatively accessible housing, revitalize our downtowns, improve physical and environmental health by reducing driving, and capture the embodied energy of existing buildings by rezoning the street level spaces of our declining downtowns, thereby addressing five major issues. Some of the challenges faced are:

-bringing the building up to existing codes

-cost of retrofitting

-market value of such units: often attract younger renters/buyers with larger housing budget

Retrofitting and rezoning our existing empty storefronts and the spaces above not only brings life back to downtown, but can limit the transportation crisis faced by many communities. Some planners at the Small Town and Rural facilitated discussion noted that their communities lacked any public transit, while others were being "bankrupted" by their paratransit systems. Accessible housing downtown in concert with walkable neighborhoods can also provide access to fresh nutritious foods, particularly important to older adults who normally absorb less nutrients from their foods which is further exacerbated by prescription medications. Living

downtown can reduce a sense of isolation just by being around other people, but also by providing more opportunities for social interaction and civic engagement.