

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA: Senior growth redesigning roads, transit

Old age caught up to Richard Burton a year ago, when his eyesight deteriorated to the point he could only ride his beloved motorcycle on sunny days.

Difficult though it was for the lifelong off-road rider, Burton, 76, stowed his street-legal yellow Yamaha dirt bike in a storage space near his Yucaipa trailer, recognizing it was just too dangerous with his macular degeneration picking away at his vision.

"I've had good health all my life," Burton said. "It didn't hit me I was old until I couldn't see so well."

As Americans live longer and the post-war generation hits its golden years, the issue of how a deluge of seniors will move around is starting to affect transportation planning, changing everything from the brightness and size of street signs to increased spending on public transit.

"The growing ranks of older Americans will far outpace previous generations with their level of mobility and activity. Serving their needs will require a transportation system that includes safer roads, safer vehicles, safer drivers and improved choices," said Will Wilkins, executive director of TRIP, a national transportation policy group.

TRIP last month released a study that found major investment is needed to make America's aging road system safe for older drivers. Among the recommendations proposed by the agency is larger letters on street signs, increased use of rumble strips to warn drivers when they are straying into the shoulder of highways, more education tailored to senior drivers, safer vehicles and more funding for public transit in underserved areas.

In Riverside and San Bernardino counties the number of residents age 80 or older increased 16.3 percent between 2005 and 2010, according to the state health department, to 119,157. During the same period the overall population of the counties grew by 13.3 percent. Residents are living longer and staying healthier, which is putting a strain on elderly services.

The recent increase is just the beginning, with the baby boomer generation born after World War II set to turn 65 over the next two decades. Millions of more Americans will retire — relatively healthy — increasing the ranks of seniors in the country by 60 percent according to some estimates. Many will keep their cars, requiring traffic planners to compensate for drivers who might need larger stop signs that are more visible at night.

"As we get older, it is more difficult to see at night so the signs need to be brighter," said

Patricia Romo, deputy transportation director for Riverside County. "Reflective markings are being placed along shoulders and along the center lane lines in rural areas to improve visibility at night as part of our resurfacing projects."

Help with visibility

The lettering on roadside traffic signs is also getting larger, Romo said. Signs now have 6" upper-case and 4" lower-case letters, a change from older signs that have 5" letters, all upper-case.

The changes to brighter and bigger signs and other improvements happen as part of routine maintenance. Many of the improvements are required to comply with slight changes in federal standards, Romo said.

"We are also conditioning new urban developments to place more street lighting than we did in the past to improve visibility at night," Romo said.

Researchers believe the majority of seniors will continue driving or rely on friends and family for a ride. In most cases healthy Baby Boomers will remain behind the wheel, even if it requires more work on their part.

About half the states, including California, require additional testing of older drivers. After age 70, a driver cannot renew their license by mail. Doctors and family members can also refer a driver to the California Department of Motor Vehicles for a review, if they think the person should not be driving. The DMV has policies in place to test senior drivers, allowing for the senior to challenge the findings in an administrative review.

By choice or because of losing their license, many elders will give up or lessen their driving in favor of walking, biking or maybe using a golf cart to get around. More will also rely on public transit. Bus agencies such as Riverside Transit Agency and Omnitrans are already bracing for more elderly and disabled passengers. But the influx of older riders comes at a price; bus systems are spending more of their budgets on paratransit door-to-door service.

The cost to carry the average RTA rider is about \$4, said bus agency spokesman Brad Weaver, where a Dial-A-Ride client costs about \$23.

"The growing senior population in the region will certainly be a focus as we strive to maintain the success of Dial-A-Ride," Weaver said.

But public transit stretches only so far. In downtown Riverside and Corona, seniors

can usually find a nearby bus stop. But in more suburban areas such as Moreno Valley or Temecula the walk can be too much for older riders.

Open space

In Calimesa, as in other fringe cities where services might be scarcer, seniors are likely to find themselves nearly cut off, said Kathy Knox, manager of the city's senior center.

Burton is one example, she said, of what awaits some soon-to-be seniors, as more Baby Boomers age and confront needing transit.

"This has all been brand new to me," Burton said. "I got into a position where I didn't know what to do."

He found himself for the first time in his life reaching out to public assistance, working with county agencies to have someone come by once a week to drive him where he needs to go in a four-hour window. Burton said he tries to do all of his shopping during the span.

Though his sight is failing, Burton can still get around on sunny days by walking or riding a bicycle. He said he's lucky the Norton Younglove Senior Center in Calimesa is about four blocks away.

A chore to travel

For others the trip can be more difficult. Juan Herrera, 80, uses an electric scooter to ride from his Yucaipa home to Calimesa for lunch at the senior center. But a lack of sidewalks makes it tough, forcing Herrera to compete for space with car traffic on County Line Road.

Bob and Ruth Schoff live too far away to walk, and changes in RTA's route eliminated bus service to their neighborhood along Desert Lawn Drive. Last week, their son who was visiting, dropped them off at the senior center; other times they coordinate rides.

Their age and health issues forced both to give up driving, something that frustrates Bob, 89. His right knee keeps him from driving, and he cites getting blown out of a foxhole at the Battle of the Bulge as the reason for his bum leg.

After years of controlling their own lives, Burton and Schoff said it is challenging to transition to needing to rely on others for transportation.

"The most embarrassing thing is you have to ask someone for a ride," Bob Schoff said, reaching to hold his wife's hand. "It's hard for us to rely on someone else, when they say we can't do it."