Planning Better Together

Walk audits, park audits, and a place for residents in planning

Dave Beal
Age Friendly Olmsted County
Family Service Rochester

APA MN Planning Conference 2026

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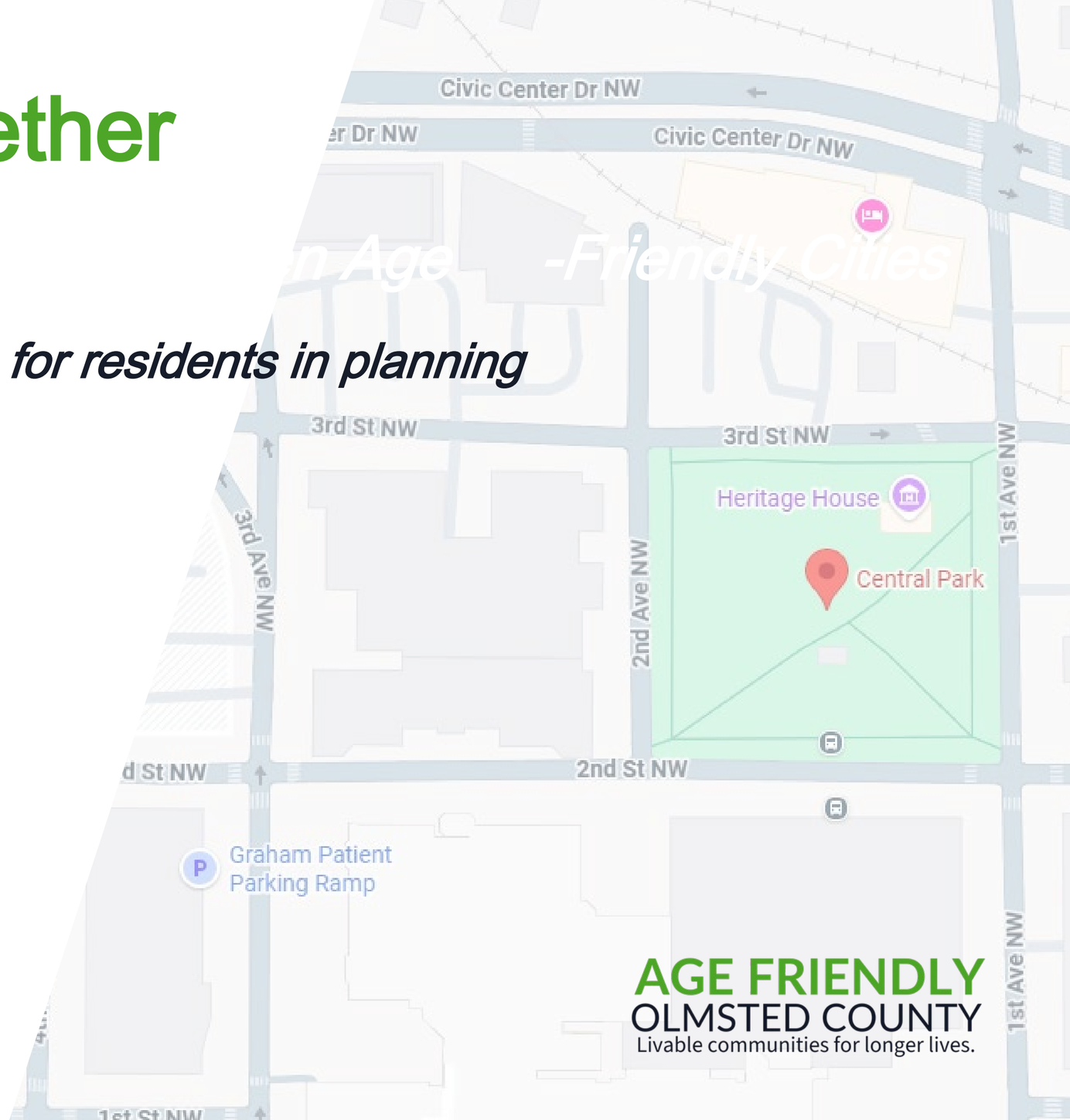
SHAPING MINNESOTA'S FUTURE TOGETHER



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The planning question

Will ordinary places keep working as our lives get longer?

Housing, transportation, streets, and parks interact.

The experience of a trip matters as much as any one facility.

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APA AGING IN COMMUNITY POLICY GUIDE

TALKING POINTS FOR PLANNERS

APA's guidance in local practice

Engage older adults as contributors to planning knowledge.

Make transportation choices usable from door to destination.

Connect public places with the neighborhoods around them.

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THE AGING OF AMERICA
By the Numbers

By 2030, nearly **20%** of the U.S. population will be over 65.

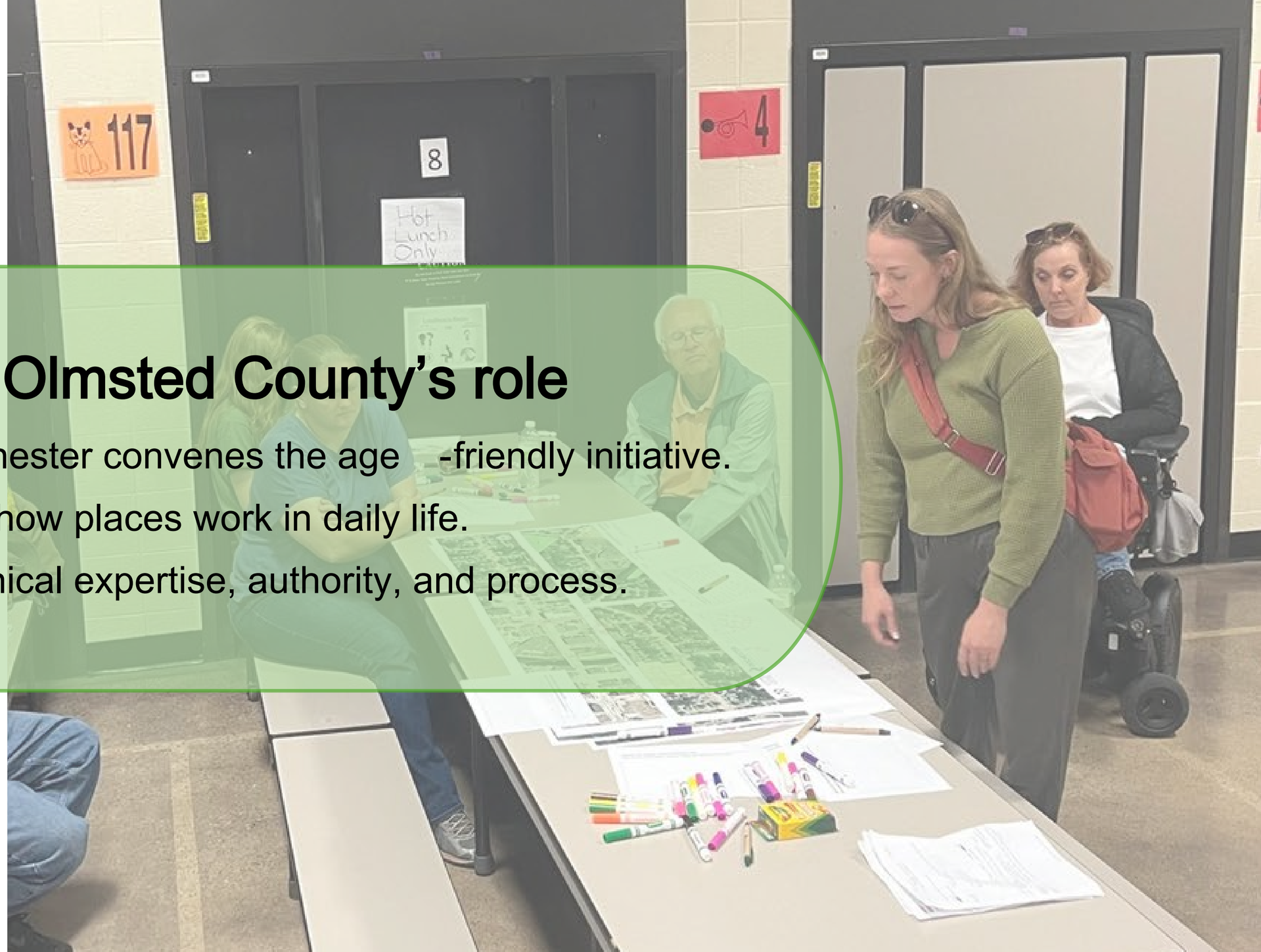
The fastest growing age demographic is **85+**.

The Census Bureau projects

>1 million centenarians

living in the U.S. by 2050.

Boomers control



Age Friendly Olmsted County's role

Family Service Rochester convenes the age -friendly initiative.

Residents describe how places work in daily life.

City staff bring technical expertise, authority, and process.

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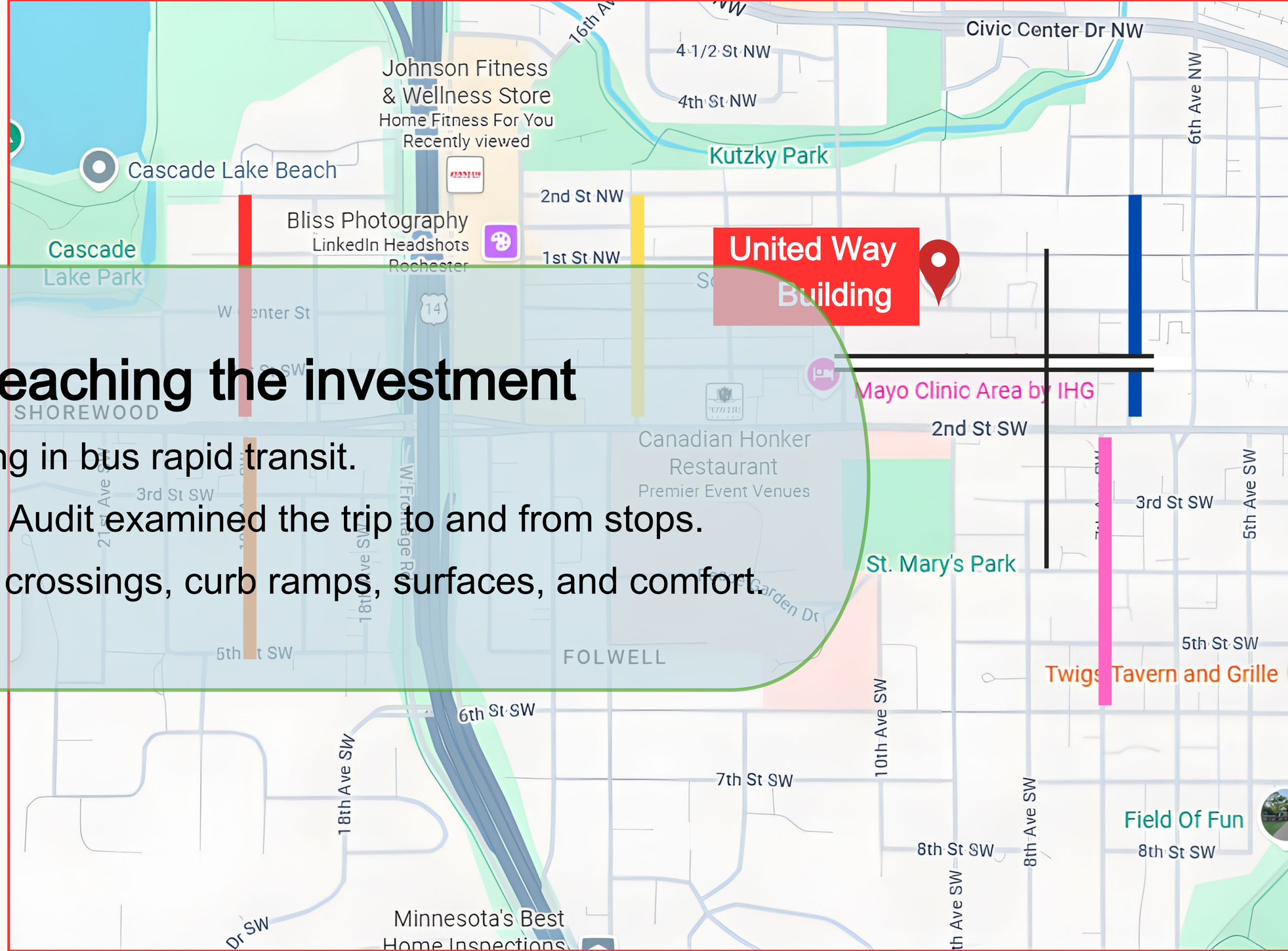
LINK BRT: reaching the investment

The City is investing in bus rapid transit.

Our Walk and Roll Audit examined the trip to and from stops.

Participants noted crossings, curb ramps, surfaces, and comfort.



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What the City’s review taught us

Staff from seven City teams reviewed the audit together.

The discussion reached beyond individual sidewalk defects.

Staff saw greatest value at feasibility and scoping.

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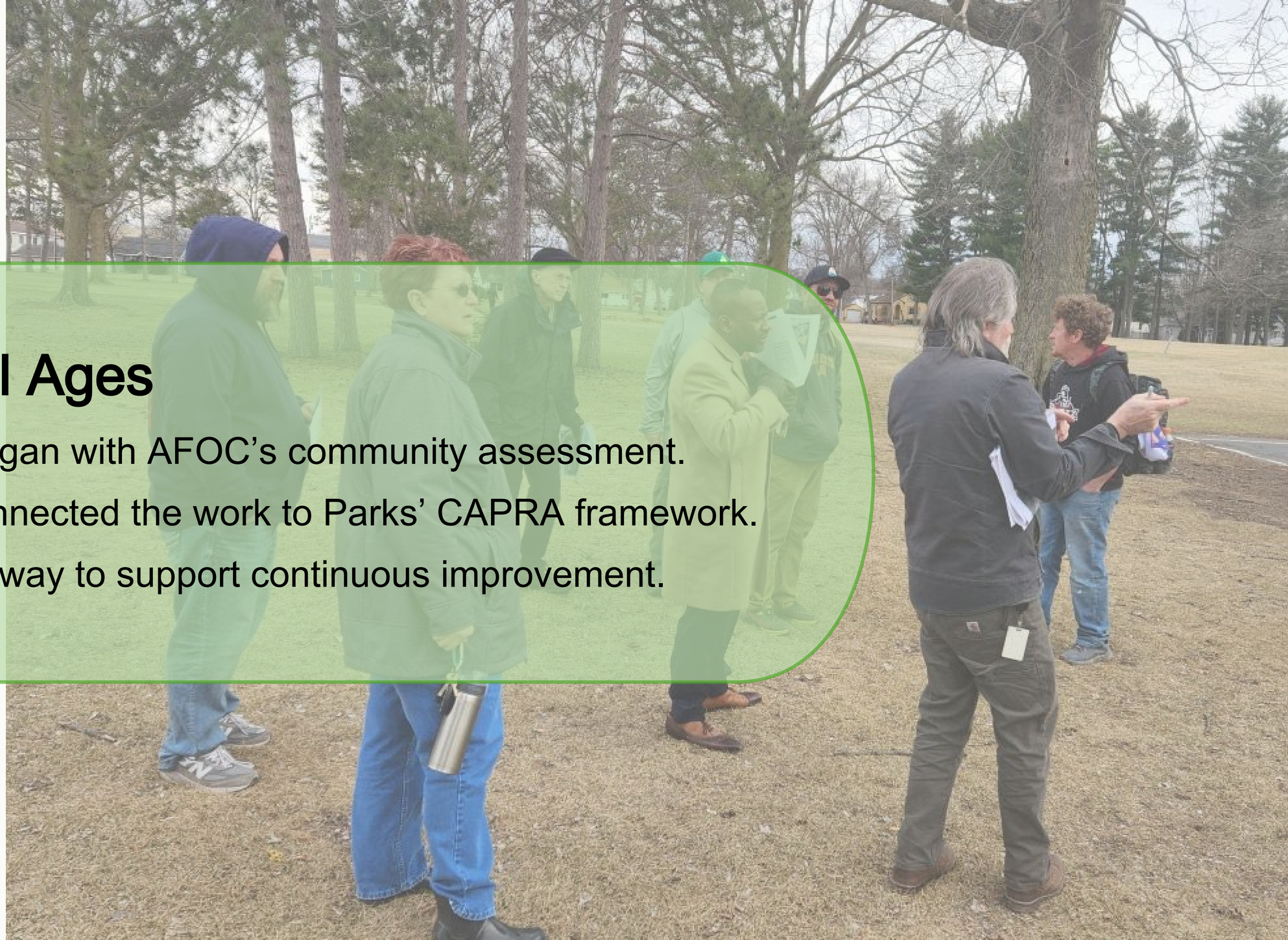
Parks for All Ages

The park work began with AFOC's community assessment.

A white paper connected the work to Parks' CAPRA framework.

Audits became a way to support continuous improvement.



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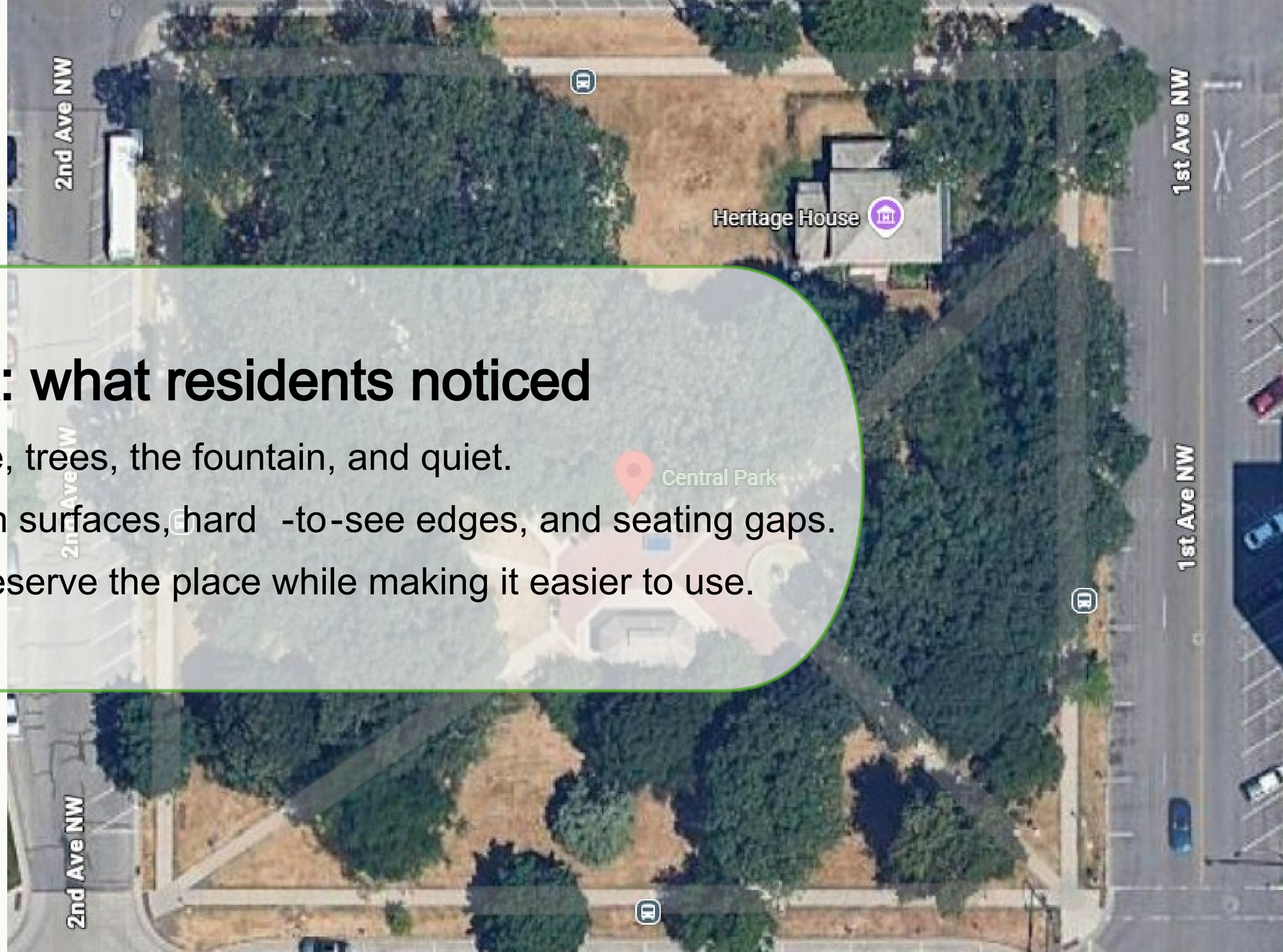
Central Park: what residents noticed

They valued shade, trees, the fountain, and quiet.

They found uneven surfaces, hard -to-see edges, and seating gaps.

The aim was to preserve the place while making it easier to use.



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Access accumulates across a journey

A usable entrance cannot compensate for an unusable route.

Seating, shade, restrooms, maintenance, and safety work together.

The same principle applies to transit and daily destinations.

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What the partnership has achieved

Residents’ observations reached crossdepartment City discussions.

AFOC has a more dependable route into municipal planning.

We have a clearer answer about when to engage.

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TALKING POINTS FOR PLANNERS

demands a fundamental shift in planning in order to minimize
alth challenges that will otherwise overwhelm communities.

A practical question for planners

Where can lived experience enter while choices are still open?

Which existing municipal process can carry it forward?

How will residents hear what happened to their input?

spective in the planning process. Ensure participation across age, language,
immigration status, ability and technology barriers, and solicit input in all
icies.

and accessible housing options. Promote housing development of differing
ting housing resources, and advance universal design and visitability standards to
using.

uality transportation options. Provide choices that facilitate the maximum degree
ople of differing abilities. Design and fund appropriate mobility components.

to create welcoming communities. Maximize connections among housing,
ation, human services and community engagement, to facilitate health,
y of life.

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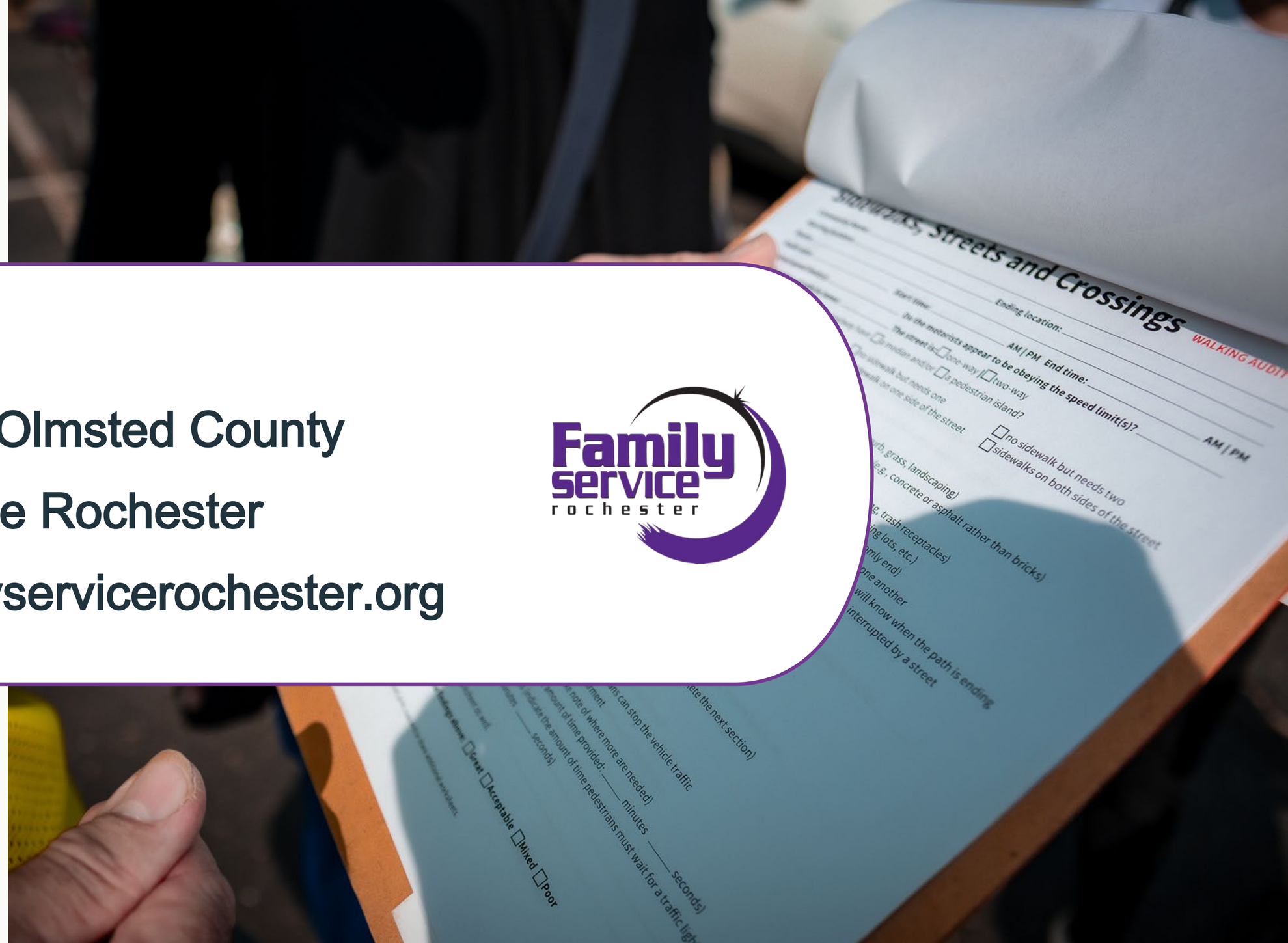

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Planning Better Together: How Community Partnerships Strengthen Age-Friendly Cities

APA Minnesota • October 22, 2026 •

Dave Beal | Age-Friendly Olmsted County | Family Service Rochester

Slide 1 Planning Better Together

Good afternoon. I'm Dave Beal, coordinator of Age-Friendly Olmsted County at Family Service Rochester. I appreciate the invitation to join this panel.

I'm not a professional planner. I work with older residents, community organizations, and municipal staff. What I can offer is a local account of how residents' experience can enter planning work.

APA has made a strong case for communities where people can age and stay connected to daily life. Rochester offers one example of putting that thinking to use. I'll focus on routes to bus rapid transit and public parks. In each setting, residents know a place through use, while City staff understand its design, maintenance, and planning. The title, Planning Better Together, describes what we have been learning from that exchange.

Slide 2 The planning question

Here is the question that runs through our work: will ordinary places keep working as our lives get longer?

A home can be physically suitable but isolated from daily destinations. A transit stop can be accessible while the crossing leading to it is difficult. A park can have an accessible entrance and nowhere comfortable to sit.

APA's Aging in Community Policy Guide asks planners to see connections among housing, land use, transportation, health, and community

supports. Residents experience those systems together, as a trip from a front door to a destination and back.

We have asked how an age-friendly initiative can help the City see those connections along an actual route or in an actual place. An audit cannot solve every barrier. It can give staff a clearer account of how people experience the environments they plan and maintain.

Slide 3 APA's guidance in local practice

APA lays out six broad policy directions. Three are especially visible in our work: engage older adults, provide useful transportation choices, and create connected, welcoming places.

Participation means treating older adults as people with knowledge before a proposal is finished. Transportation means looking at the full trip to and from the bus. Welcoming places depend on the connections between public space and the surrounding neighborhood.

These ideas are familiar to this audience. The challenge is getting residents' knowledge into decisions. We visit a place with people who use it, record what they observe, organize the findings, and bring them to City staff through a continuing working relationship.

Their observations add evidence about use. We have learned that the timing of that evidence matters as much as its content.

Slide 4 AFOC's role

Age-Friendly Olmsted County is led by Family Service Rochester. We work with community partners and have built a particularly useful relationship with the City of Rochester.

The division of labor matters. Residents can tell us where they hesitate at a crossing or whether a bench lets them rest and stand again. AFOC convenes the audit, turns observations into a report with route or site

findings, and shares it with the City staff responsible for the place. Staff bring technical expertise, standards, budgets, project schedules, and public authority. They can tell us what requires closer study and where findings might enter a decision.

We do not own the parks or streets or make final design decisions. Our role is to make a resident's account of using a place clear enough for staff to consider and act on.

The relationship continues after a report goes in. City colleagues can tell us what they learned, what a project cannot resolve, and where future community input would help. That exchange helps us bring people in before the next project is nearly finished.

This has taken more than one meeting. The park work began with a shared white paper and continued through individual site audits. The transit work produced a report and then a City discussion about how to use such reports in future projects. Neither relationship depends on AFOC having design authority. It depends on staff being willing to receive the observations and on us doing the work to make them useful.

Slide 5 LINK BRT Reaching the investment

Let me turn first to LINK, Rochester's bus rapid transit project. The City is making a major transit investment. We looked at a part of the trip that can be easy to overlook: getting to and from a stop.

Our Walk and Roll Audit brought volunteers onto routes near planned service. They examined sidewalks, crossings, curb ramps, traffic, construction disruptions, and the comfort of the trip. We asked people to describe where they had to slow down, detour, wait, or make a judgment about safety.

The report identified concerns about crossings, traffic speed, curb-ramp alignment, and sidewalk conditions. Some issues were already known to staff. Residents showed how they affected the trip as a whole.

This was a qualitative audit, not a representative survey or engineering inspection. Its value is showing how conditions accumulate as someone travels. Several small barriers may combine to make a trip difficult or discouraging.

Slide 6 What the City's review taught us

After receiving the report, staff from seven City teams reviewed it together: transit planning, planning, traffic engineering, city engineering, project delivery, street operations, and the sidewalk improvement program. We had organized the report around routes, what volunteers observed, and practical recommendations.

Their response was specific. The report generated what they called "real dialogue." Their discussion moved beyond individual sidewalk defects to first- and last-mile access: whether the route to a stop allows people to use the transit investment at all.

Then they told us something even more useful. Community input of this kind has greatest value at feasibility and scoping, before design decisions harden. Staff recalled earlier projects where receiving it sooner would have changed the conversation.

If we wait until design, an audit may identify a problem but leave few workable choices. During scoping, the same observation can help frame the problem or identify what needs closer study. For us, this shifted the question from "What did the audit find?" to "When should we do the next one, and with whom?"

That gives us something concrete to work on with the City. It also offers a practical lesson for other partnerships.

I want to emphasize that staff did not simply thank us for the report. They reviewed it across the parts of City government that would have to deal with the conditions we described. Their feedback changed how we think about the audit method itself. The question now is how to identify projects early enough, whom to invite on a route, and how to get findings to staff while they still have choices.

Slide 7 Parks for All Ages

Our park work began in a different setting but followed much the same logic. In our community assessment, residents raised questions about access to public space, safety, and the importance of parks, trails, and nature in daily life.

We worked with Rochester Parks and Recreation on a Parks for All Ages white paper. We connected age-friendly questions to the department's existing CAPRA accreditation and continuous improvement framework. That gave us a common language and a place for the findings to go.

Older adults then visited particular parks and reported what helped them use those places, what got in the way, and what they hoped the City would preserve. We organized the observations for Parks staff to consider alongside their own planning, maintenance, and programming work.

That alignment matters. Community partners contribute more effectively when we understand the work our municipal colleagues already do and where an audit can help.

Slide 8 Central Park What residents noticed

Consider Central Park. Residents valued its mature trees, shade, fountain, historic character, and quiet. Those were reasons to come and reasons to stay.

They also noticed uneven paving, edges that were hard to see, seating that did not work well for everyone, and concerns about lighting and restrooms.

One detail has stayed with me: seating. On a plan, a bench may look like an amenity. For someone with limited stamina, a stable bench with a back and arms may determine whether a visit is possible. Think of walking toward the fountain under the trees. A place to rest along that route, and a way to get up again, changes the experience of the park. The bench belongs to the route and to the reason for being there.

Residents wanted the character they loved to remain while making it easier to use. That is age-friendly planning in an ordinary public place.

That example also helped us see why it is important to ask what works. The fountain, the trees, and the quiet are assets. If an audit records barriers alone, it may miss the qualities that make a place worth visiting and that any improvement should protect.

Slide 9 Access accumulates across a journey

The park work helped us see that access is cumulative. Arrival routes, surfaces, slopes, seating, shade, restrooms, lighting, and maintenance work together. A park may have a usable entrance but no comfortable place to rest after a walk across it.

The same is true of the trip to a transit stop. A level boarding platform cannot make the full trip accessible if someone cannot cross the street to reach it. A suitable home can also be disconnected from the neighborhood that supports daily life.

I use “journey” as a way of drawing together the audits. It reminds me to ask what happens before and after the feature under discussion. Changes in vision, balance, or stamina can make a weakness in a public place more apparent. Addressing it may help people of many ages.

Slide 10 What the partnership has achieved

What has this partnership accomplished so far?

Residents' observations reached City staff and prompted discussion across departments. The park work created a continuing relationship with Parks and Recreation. The LINK review gave us a clearer place for community input in a project timeline. We have also learned to organize findings in a form staff can use and to listen to their response.

We cannot yet demonstrate a population-wide change in park use or transit access, or attribute a construction decision to an audit. We should follow what happens after these reports. But we can describe a change in how the people involved work together.

The partnership gives us a route for community knowledge to enter municipal work earlier and more consistently. That is an implementation step whose longer-term effects we still need to measure.

Slide 11 A practical question for planners

Let me close with a practical invitation. If you are planning a project, ask which community partners could help you understand a route or place before its scope is settled. Invite them to observe with residents. Tell them which decisions are open. Then tell participants what happened to their observations.

Some concerns will be beyond a project's scope. Others will require technical review or a difficult tradeoff. Residents can hear that honestly. What matters is a continuing conversation and another chance to contribute before the next project is almost finished.

APA has given planners a strong foundation for aging in community. Rochester shows one way to practice it through a partnership between residents and the City. I would welcome a conversation with anyone

trying something similar, or with ideas for how we can improve our method.

Thank you. I look forward to the discussion.

Approximate spoken length: 1,808 words. At 125–145 words per minute, allow about 12–14 minutes, plus slide transitions.