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Would you know how to take the bus if you couldn't drive?

BY BETTY BOOKER

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

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Tressa Pinkleton, 21, trained herself to take the bus.

Heed, boomers: Someday you may be sitting at a bus stop, too.

Many boomers are like Pinkleton, who grew up in the suburbs where cars are the way to go.

Buses require changed thinking: "You don't have control," she said, waiting for her morning bus.

Pinkleton leaves her car at home because the bus is cheaper than parking downtown where she works.

As a senior in philosophy and public policy at Virginia Commonwealth University, she's aware that many of the 78 million-member baby boom generation must trade their wheels for bus, van or rail when they can't drive.

Most boomers just don't know that yet.

Maybe that's because 54-year-olds think they're 40, according to The Boomer Project at the Southeastern Institute of Research.

"The middle age of Aquarius" is ages 48 to 73, when boomers say old age begins, John Martin, SIR's president and chief executive officer, told the AARP Virginia Mobility Conference last week at the Sheraton Richmond West Hotel.

Fiftysomethings may think they're 15 years younger than they are, but "boomers aren't the same as when they were 40," Martin continued. "One deniable truth: They will age."

And in great numbers: By 2020, Virginia will have 2.1 million people older than 60, nearly 50 percent more than today's 1.4 million.

Boomers "want to be mobile longer as they stretch out aging."

Then something has to be done now to change community design, said Hannah Twaddell, senior planner for Renaissance Planning Group in Charlottesville.

Sprawling people-unfriendly development doesn't lend itself to prolonged independence. The need for expensive transportation is lessened by established "livable communities" where people can get to services without driving.

Empty nesters are moving from suburban and rural areas into cities like Richmond for smaller quarters and proximity to culture, shopping and services.

When they can't drive, they have alternatives in the city.

Here's the catch: If you aren't used to public transportation, you have to learn how.

To get past the fear factor, Fairfax has a brochure on how to take the bus. Louisville, Ky., has a senior riders training video.

Richmond's GRTC Transit System takes buses to retirement communities to teach seniors how to ride.

Service is "pretty good" in the city, but graying suburbs have problems, said John Lewis Jr., GRTC's chief executive officer.

GRTC serves Henrico County and Chesterfield County commuters, but not after 7 p.m. or on weekends in Henrico.

More suburban service is needed, but "how we pay for it, that's the million-dollar question," Lewis said.

If nothing is done to prepare for Virginia's 50 percent increase in seniors in the next 13 years, "we're in trouble," said Meade Boswell, director of older adult initiatives for United Way of Greater Richmond & Petersburg.

Most suburban boomers are "used to going where they want, when they want. They're going to feel clipped-winged."

"They will insist on a variety of transportation -- and then learn how to use it. There's probably going to be a denial, then a wake-up. The wake-up comes when their parents need transportation."

It's not so bad, Pinkleton said. "When I get older, I probably will take the bus if I can't drive."

Contact staff writer Betty Booker at bbooker@timesdispatch.com or (804) 649-6805.