

7-1-2011

Aging Related Issues and the Agenda Setting Process: A Comparative Analysis

Annie Tam
Western University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/lgp-mrps>



Part of the [Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tam, Annie, "Aging Related Issues and the Agenda Setting Process: A Comparative Analysis" (2011). *MPA Major Research Papers*. 100.
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/lgp-mrps/100>

This Major Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Local Government Program at Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in MPA Major Research Papers by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact tadam@uwo.ca, wlsadmin@uwo.ca.

Aging Related Issues and the Agenda Setting Process: A Comparative Analysis

MPA Research Report

Submitted to:

The Local Government Program Department of Political Science The
University of Western Ontario

Annie Tam
July 2011

Abstract

Population Aging is a phenomenon acknowledged all around the world, especially within developed nations where a large proportion of the population is over the age of 55. These statistics propose a troubling future if no action is taken. Over that last decade municipalities have recognized the need to make a change in hopes to provide an environment that will allow older adults to comfortably and actively age in place. However, although the consequences are known, many municipalities have yet to implement any aging related initiatives that would facilitate active aging. Theories of the agenda setting process suggests there are many critical elements that must exist before an item such as aging can appear on the policy agenda. By conducting a comparative analysis of the Age-Friendly London initiative in the City of London and the Older Adult Plan in the City of Mississauga, the purpose of this paper is to identify characteristics of the agenda setting process described in theories and how those characteristics facilitated the success of the initiative.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	5
METHODOLOGY	9
AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES	12
ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT	14
THE THEORY BEHIND THE AGENDA SETTING PROCESS	16
THE POLICY CYCLE	19
POLICY SUBSYSTEMS	21
POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT	22
TRANS-BOUNDARY AGENDA SETTING	24
COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AGE-FRIENDLY LONDON AND THE OLDER ADULT PLAN FROM THE CITY OF MISSISSAUGA	25
CASE STUDY #1 - AGE-FRIENDLY LONDON	26
CASE STUDY #2 – CITY OF MISSISSAUGA OLDER ADULT PLAN	33
CONCLUSION	39
BIBLIOGRAPHY	43

List of Tables

Figure 1 – Policy Cycle

Figure 2 – Policy Cycle and Emergent Trends

Introduction

Aging is part of an evolutionary process that each and every human being must endure. Together as a planet, our world is aging and becoming older. The baby boomer generation – a distinct and unique cohort that has experienced and lived through the industrial revolution and survived through the Great Depression are beginning to reach the age of 65. The phenomenon of population aging will become a challenge that all countries will have to face. And if countries turn a blind eye to this rapidly approaching “silver tsunami”, the associated consequences will be socially and economically devastating. Population aging by definition refers to the increase of the median age of a country, where people are living longer and having fewer children. As a result, there are many implications for governments regarding social policy and how to appropriately plan for increasing demands on social services imposed by aging individuals.

Population aging is widespread, but most advanced in highly developed countries such as Canada. In 2001, one in eight Canadians was over the age of 65. By 2026, one in five will be over the age of 65. And as a whole, approximately 28% of Canada’s population will be over the age of 65 by 2030 (Census, 2006). There are many associated concerns that must be addressed when such a large proportion of the population is aging. For example, older adults often require more medical services, therefore putting extra demand on an already constrained healthcare system. In 2008, the older adult population accounted for 44% of the total healthcare expenditure. In more monetary terms, on average, Canada spent approximately \$10,742 per Canadian over the age of 65, as opposed to \$2,097 per Canadian ages from 1 to 64 on healthcare (StatsCan, 2006). Moreover, with the increasing prevalence of Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias, there is an outcry for more long-term care beds and better assisted

living resources. Population aging puts a spotlight on healthcare services dedicated to chronic care management, health promotion, and preventative interdisciplinary collaboration. But health is only one piece of the puzzle.

With more boomers nearing the age of retirement, the dependency ratio will increase. That is, the ratio of the combined youth population (0 to 19 years) and senior population (65 or older) to the working-age population (20 to 64 years). In 2006, for every 100 working-age persons, there were 21 dependent seniors. It is predicated that by 2056, there will be 84 dependent seniors for every 100 working-age persons (StatsCan, 2011). Which means there are more people moving out of the labour force than coming in. Evidently, this can generate serious problems for a country such as Canada, where the older and younger populations consume the highest proportion of the government's expenditures of health, social and community services, and social security. As result, there is an increased burden on the declining working-age population, in which they will now have to provide more to compensate for the non-working age population. With that being said, there is more to this picture than just increased health care expenditures and the perception that the aging population is a burden. Population aging should highlight the gaps within the system and trigger a social and political response.

Over the last decade, countries around the world have acknowledged a need for action. In 2005, the World Health Organization launched the Age-Friendly Cities Program to create a world that is friendly for all ages, with particular attention to the older generations. This program gained momentum and soon enough, municipalities all around the globe started to adopt this philosophy. Land-use planning policies and zoning regulations imposed many years ago have secluded residential areas from commercial areas with the initial notion of reducing public health concerns. As a result, residential

communities are situated often away from commercial areas that contain essential services including family physicians and other healthcare providers, grocery stores, etc. An environment built around the automobile has severely disabled older adults and their ability to maneuver around, but more importantly, it has hindered this population's capacity to comfortably age in place and remain physically and socially active – ultimately resulting in poor health, increased healthcare consumption and the eventual institutionalization. It is imperative for all governments to understand and anticipate the consequences of population aging and take action.

It is crucial for local governments to create and implement policies and programs to address this aging demographic. Moreover, aging related issues need to be addressed on the local level to effectively and efficiently provide programs and services to seniors. Many decisions must be made on the local level before a community can be age-friendly. In addition, many of the public services are regulated by the municipality itself, such as transit, recreational programs etc., and therefore, administration and council must take into consideration which public services are to be improved to reach age-friendly status. Although some may argue that the province dictates a lot of what appears on the municipal policy agenda, aging related initiatives and many other social policies and programs are derived on the local level – meaning, the local government has a significant function in addressing concerns that directly affect the quality of life of their residents. Each municipality is different, which means that policies and programs will differ in accordance to demand and available resources. It is the responsibility of local government to identify what services are appropriate, how to effectively and efficiently provide and implement policies for their municipality, and also what governance structures need to be in place to ensure there is continual communication

and commitment to the program. However, the role of local government may not be clearly defined if the government itself is unaware or not invested in aging related issues.

Policies and programs that surround the aging population must encompass a range of services that span across different departments of a municipality. Services for older adults requires a trans-boundary approach where every department within the public service must contribute to enable older adults to age healthily and comfortably in place. It takes more than just a dedicated department or employee for seniors related services. To sufficiently provide for an aging demographic, there must be interdepartmental and intergovernmental collaboration to produce services that are sustainable, and ultimately produce a system that will address the needs of older adults. It is critical to have an agenda that addresses the fundamental needs of an aging population and how to implement policies, programs, and services that are sustainable. The key to addressing aging related issues is to have it appear on the policy agenda. It is this agenda setting process that must understood before any actions can take place to induce change. Moreover, it is this process that will define the role of local government. The purpose of this paper is to identify characteristics of the agenda setting process described in theories and provide a practical comparison between two municipalities – Age-Friendly London and the City of Mississauga’s Older Adult Plan.

Methodology

The purpose of this major research paper is to analyze theories outlining the agenda setting process and conducting a comparative analysis between Age-Friendly London and the City of Mississauga's Older Adult Plan to illustrate what occurs in practice. Extensive research was conducted to gain insight into what academics portray as the agenda setting process. In addition, by obtaining research data on specific elements of this process it allowed for rich comparisons to be made when analyzing each case.

The Age-Friendly London case study was chosen because of its international accreditation. Being the first municipality in Canada to join the World Health Organizations's Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities, it deserves to be recognized and analyzed. Due to the nature of this initiative and its international status, how this project appeared on the policy agenda would be important to explain. In addition, as part of the agenda setting process, understanding the who, what, and how, of this initiative is critical to acknowledge, since the City of London is now obligated to include age-friendly communities on their policy agenda.

The City of Mississauga's Older Adult Plan is a particularly interesting case because of its unique characteristics. Some argue that large urban municipalities have trouble implementing projects that hold a "trans-boundary" element, especially for aging related issues. The formalities associated with public consultation, public engagement, monetary and human resources, etc. can be overwhelming for some municipalities. However, for the City of Mississauga, they have successfully implemented a plan dedicated to improving the lives of older adults. Moreover, this plan is sustained within the City's strategic plan, which is different from the City of London. Both cities illustrate

very different elements of the agenda setting process, in which each used certain characteristics to get onto the policy agenda. Together, the two case studies provided a mix of processes and procedures that would allow for success, and depicted two very different outcomes to practice.

Interviews were conducted to further understand what occurred on the policy agenda and front line levels to achieve its current status. Both the City of London and the City of Mississauga employees were interviewed, and each were asked a standard set of 8 questions that would provide context, not otherwise captured through text or theory. However, some of the questions did hold the assumption that the individual was well aware of the initiative and held a particular role in its creation or roll out. The interviews lasted no longer than 45 minutes, and each interviewee is to remain anonymous. The approach was to take these interviews along with a review of the initiative documents and analyze how theory applied to these situations. The extensive literature review captured significant information to appropriately describe what occurred and how it applied to practice.

Due to the nature of agenda setting and the difficulty of predicting the unpredictable, there are certain limitations associated with this research paper. Firstly, the interview questions may not capture every intricate detail of what actually occurred in real time. It is difficult to validate whether the ideas shared conclusively caused the agenda to shift or the initiative to appear on the agenda in the first place. However, it is important to note that interview answers are very subjective. It is based on the individuals' own perception of what occurred, which can be troublesome. A second limitation is the assumption is made that individuals participating in these interviews are aware of what occurred and/or is currently underway. Some of the questions referred to current or future decisions being made around the initiative. By interviewing individuals

not so much aware of the project itself and the progress, did not provide sufficient information that could be used to illustrate theoretical elements of the agenda setting process. Lastly, the response rate for the City of Mississauga was extremely poor. Only one person agreed to be interviewed. However, individuals who were asked did not feel adequate enough to answer questions pertaining to the Older Adult Plan and forwarded the interview request to the employee that was interviewed.

Overall the literature review provided strong theoretical grounds for a solid comparison with practice. Moreover, the interviews gave insight that would not have been captured through media releases, document reviews, and publications produced by the city. The approach is to compare and analyze the research data to the practical data to depict how theories do in fact demonstrate to the best as possible, what occurs in practice.

Age-Friendly Communities

Population aging has brought increasing awareness to policy makers and service providers regarding “age-friendly” services and how governments can provide age-friendly services to facilitate aging in place. In recent years, developmental trends and policy decisions have intensified discussions around the built environment and how it would be the best practice towards addressing the major challenges associated with population aging (Lui, Everingham, Warburton, Cuthill, & Barlett, 2009). The World Health Organization (WHO) and governments all around the world have acknowledged that enabling older adults to age in place, within their own homes and communities for as long as possible makes both social and economic sense.

The World Health Organization introduced the Age-Friendly Cities program in 2005 to identify the environmental and social factors that contribute to healthy active aging. To support cities around the globe wishing to become age-friendly, the WHO created the World Health Organization Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities. The network acts as a mechanism to bridge cities and share best practices to ensure a common language. In addition, it facilitates growth, exchange information, provides technical support and training, and ensures cities are using the most appropriate and cost effective methods to becoming age-friendly (WHO, 2011). To become a member of this network, a municipality must commit to a process of continual assessment and improvement regarding their age-friendliness. It is critical for older adults to be engaged throughout this process to ensure that municipalities are providing the best and most appropriate services for this generation. Moreover, to receive and maintain this international accreditation, a municipality must prove they are moving forward with the

goal of becoming age-friendly and is committed to the continual improvement of their community (WHO, 2011).

The age-friendly communities project is not just intended for older adults. Its purpose is to design and produce an environment that is suitable for all ages. As Bernard Issacs states, “build for the young and you exclude the old; design for the old and you include the young.” Good urban design encompasses a multitude of elements, which will allow older adults to remain physically and socially active within their communities (Australian Local Government Association, 2006). 82% of older adults want to age in place, and having safe pedestrian passages, easy access to recreational facilities, health care services, and shopping centres can provide an environment for healthy active aging and makes the difference between dependence and independence.

Role of Local Government

The boomer generation will demand from their local governments more age-friendly services, smart urban growth alternatives, more assisted living services, and an opportunity to remain socially active within their community. Local governments are central to and can act as a body to accelerate dialogue between communities, local stakeholders, and organizations. In addition, local governments can galvanize an action plan within the corporation but also create a broad community action plan to identify and respond to the needs of their aging residents. The built environment and the social environment are mutually reinforcing. The social environment is as much an enabling factor as the mechanisms that assist mobility. Social inclusion through community or political engagement is a very important component of active aging and the enhancement of quality of life (Lui et al., 2009). Local governments can facilitate social inclusion by providing spaces and programs that honours the participation and contributions of older adults and emphasize the importance of being age-friendly. It is imperative for local governments to involve local stakeholders and older adults within the decision making process to enable social engagement and also design an environment that will sustain aging in place. Retrofitting buildings, incorporating older adults into most decision making processes, and empowering social participation should become a central element of municipalities' strategic plan to prepare for an aging population.

Mentioned prior, services regarding the aging population requires interdisciplinary and intergovernmental collaboration. It is a synergy of social services such as health, housing, transportation, social security, community services, etc. In 2009-2010, the Ontario Seniors' Secretariat (OSS) held regional forums, which provided an opportunity for the Province to gain insight into what has already been done and to

allow municipalities to learn from each other. Moreover, it facilitated an opportunity for municipalities to network and encouraged new municipalities to follow those that had a strong foundation of age-friendly initiatives. It is evident that age-friendly initiatives happen on a very local level, where local governments must initialize collaborations on all fronts from internal departmental partnerships to external stakeholders. In order to move forward as a province, municipalities must share the same language and understand the severity of population aging. Similar to the WHO, the OSS acts as a liaison and central hub for the dissemination of information and networking opportunities. The organization connects municipalities and its stakeholders to not only gain access into how communities have become age-friendly, but also to collaborate and create tools to assist upcoming age-friendly communities initiatives. The bridging of municipalities and invested stakeholders have essentially created a network of best practices from which interested individuals and/or municipalities can share and learn from each other. There is no doubt that policies and programs must be created and implemented on the local level.

The Theory Behind the Agenda Setting Process

Agenda setting is a complex dynamic that involves many events to take place, and is one of the most important functions of a government. It is a process by which issues and problems commands the attention and consideration of government to become public policy. Moreover, it can explain why some issues appear on the policy agenda, and others of the same caliber do not (Lockett, 1984). Before these technicalities can be defined, one must take into consideration the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory.

The punctuated equilibrium theory as defined by Baumgartner and Jones (1993) suggests that policy agendas remain relatively stable until a shock is imposed onto the organization from an outside source, such as the 9/11 attack. As a result, this causes the organization to engage in a frenzy of policy activity to accommodate new demands - shifting the agenda. Within this equilibrium, policymaking can be quite predicible and incremental in nature. For example, there is considerable pressure imposed onto all levels of government to devise an action plan to adapt and accommodate to the demands of population aging. As a result, progressions towards a more age-friendly community and province have occurred incrementally across the province through local age-friendly initiatives. Often times, it is not difficult to predict a municipality's next step for policies and programs if they are suspended within their own equilibrium. It is when a crisis, a shock to the system, or a sudden lack of resources occurs, which causes the agenda setting environment to become unstable and therefore shift the agenda. Otherwise, if a municipality were to stay in equilibrium the agenda setting process can be quite predicible in nature.

The agenda setting process is highly contextual and is a crucial decisional process that affects a wide range of individuals. Governments are constantly juggling to accommodate and allocate agenda space to increasingly complex social and economic concerns that demand the attention of policymakers (Baumgartner, Breunig, Green-Pedersen, Jones, Mortensen, Nuytemans, & Walgrave, 2009). A parliamentary system such as the one in Canada is supposed to reflect the demands of voters and provide leaders with as much autonomy as possible to take action where they see fit. As a result, such a system is seen as efficient in terms of translating inputs into policy outputs (Baumgartner et al., 2009). However, there are many implications that face governments and often times, the unobservable social processes are the most influential. Social processes refer to demographic shifts such as population aging, international events, natural disasters, technological advancements etc. Consequently, these social processes may cause a shift in the severity of a particular problem of concern of the current government (Baumgartner et al., 2009). Social policy problems tend to put governments in a rather sticky situation due to the complexities associated with social services. Social constructs such as population aging reflects a slice of reality. The problem lies within the multiplicity of definitions used to define a particular social issue, from which governments use to paint a picture to understand the current situation (Elder & Cobb, 1984). The dilemma now is not just which problems will be considered for discussion, but how these problems will be defined.

In the past, aging and the aging population were not so much seen as problems, but rather facts of life from which were to be dealt with individually as best as possible. However, aging related issues have evolved to become a category on its own as a distinguished population of people. By virtue of their age, aging individuals were entitled to special considerations and were to remain on the policy agenda for years to come

(Elder & Cobb, 1984). Gearing legislation towards an increasingly vulnerable population is considered good politics. In the past, using the aging population as the foci for legislation was regarded as a political strategy. According to John Kingdon (1984) who was a leading driver to the Medicare system in the United States, devising a health insurance for this particular population made little rational sense. The premise of his notion is the elderly population is the most expensive, needed the most healthcare, from which the healthcare would provide the least amount of benefits to, and yield the least social return. However, the opportunity materialized and a health insurance scheme dedicated to this population made political sense and gained political momentum. Since then, the older adult population as a categorical policy framework gained considerable legitimacy and substantial public value, where the government has given special considerations and has defined this issue as one that warrants government responsibility (Elder & Cobb, 1984).

The Policy Cycle

The policy cycle is a very complex process that is highly influenced by its contextual environment. Within an ever-changing environment, governments experience sensory overload, from which they receive information from every angle, every perspective, and from their constituents who may hold their own biases. For that very reason, governments monitor social broadcasts, which include: social movements, mass media, lobbyists/policy subsystems etc. As a result, these observations are regarded as “political inputs”. Such information will be analyzed and taken into consideration by policymakers and politicians when evaluating a certain issue. Baumgartner et al. (2009), proposed the notion of the policy cycle. Figure 1 illustrates each stage of the policy cycle and how the agenda setting process functions.

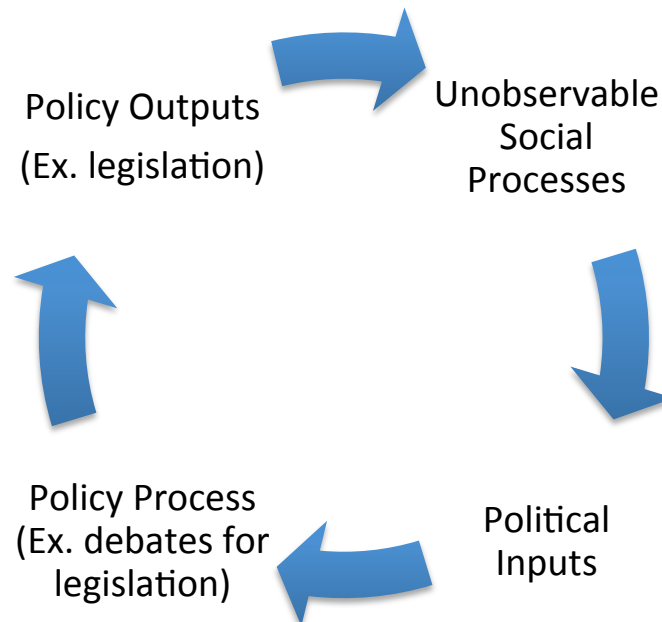


Figure 1

This policy cycle reflects the general stages of policy development. Where unobserved social processes represent societal changes such as population aging, and the sequential stages of policy making. However, for new priorities to emerge onto the policy

agenda, the “political inputs” stage is the key for inducing change; for it contains the window of opportunity (Figure 2).

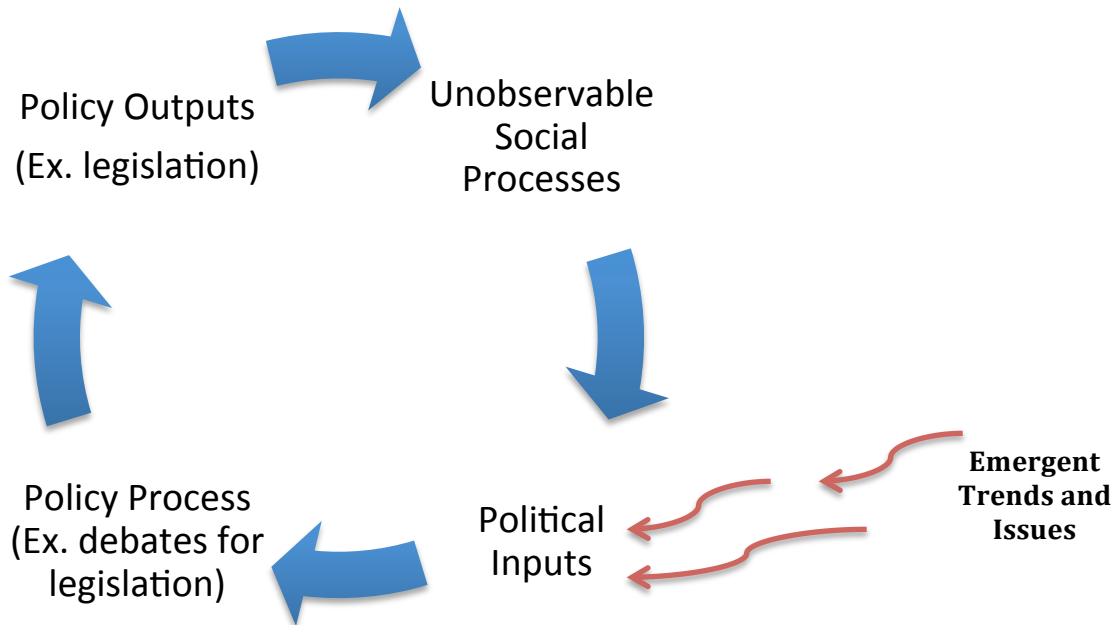


Figure 2

Figure 2, depicts how emergent trends and issues impose an external pressure to the system and hold the potential to cause the agenda setting cycle to switch gears.

Policy subsystems are one of the oldest concepts in the study of agenda setting processes. They are usually established coalitions of particular interests, whose actors advance and advocate for certain ideas or problems to appear on the policy agenda. However, this can be a very difficult task, especially for aging related initiatives. The field of gerontology is a relatively new subject matter. It is a multidisciplinary study that analyzes the social, psychological, and biological aspects of aging and overlaps with subfields such as sociology and psychology. This “trans-boundary agenda setting” will be further investigated.

Policy Subsystems

Often times, a policy subsystem begins with a group of individuals who are invested in a particular issue that may affect a potentially large population – seniors for example. Such initiatives usually have a champion that has a rich network of supporters that may include noted academics, politicians, vocal community members, etc. (Mortensen, 2010). This provides a strong platform to generate public awareness, strengthen public value for a particular cause, and potentially, with enough support and attention, politicians may feel inclined to listen and initiate change. These subsystems share common vocabularies and goals that have regularized patterns of policymaking (Pump, 2011). Going back to the notion proposed by Baumgartner and Jones regarding municipalities sustained within equilibrium, policy subsystems have the ability and the resources to induce a sudden shock to the system.

There is no contending that the agenda setting process requires a set of events to occur sequentially with impeccable timing. It cannot be underestimated that media, bureaucratic attention, the current political environment, and unexpected disruptions to the system can facilitate or hinder the agenda setting process in regards to a particular issue. The media is this viral connection that advocates want and politicians hold a certain disdain for. Media outlets are seen as a resource for voices to be heard and it is an opportunity for policy subsystems to generate awareness and make issues become a part of the public agenda. However, it is important to note that perception and interpretation is subjective and depending on all other external factors, the agenda may not be set in the desired manner as predicted by certain policy subsystems, especially when other policy subsystems are competing to appear on the same policy agenda.

Political Environment

While some may believe that Canada – having a parliamentary system – is efficient for social processes to become political inputs, and therefore induce change, it is not free from bureaucratic structures and changes in leadership. In every single country, the political environment can either foster the success or failure of a policy subsystem to cause a change within the policy agenda. Liu, Lindquist, and Vedlitz (2009), coined the term “venue” for the environment from which the agenda setting is taking place. They suggested the current President (Prime Minister for Canada), media personnel, other issues on the table, and high-level administrators can be highly influential. Governments are highly dependent on the information they receive from administrators, however administrators rely on the federal and provincial governments to translate policy decisions and whether or not to become involved in new issues to begin with (Pump, 2011). Each group can either attenuate or amplify the flow of information and policy signals, which are mandatory within the agenda setting process (May, Workman, & Jones, 2008). The political environment is very much a part of the system that must be sustained in equilibrium. Alterations of the political environment can mean the fall or rise of specific initiatives - no policy is entirely safeguarded from a change in power. The importance of the political environment is perfectly depicted by the “Age-Friendly London” case study that will be detailed.

It must be made aware that the attention span of council is relatively low, and policy subsystems must fight long and hard to attain the attention of political leaders, while competing with other policy subsystems for the same space. Moreover, if there are more important items on the table, it is obvious their attention is going to be focused elsewhere (Workman, Jochim, & Jones, 2009). A shock such as 9/11 gained the

government's immediate attention and caused the agenda to shift towards security and anti-terrorist solutions. And consequently, this sparked a re-evaluation of the system itself, and therefore altered the agenda setting process. The 9/11 attacks perfectly illustrated what governments experience when a crisis occurs. It gave rise to the Department of Homeland Security, and the United States launched the War on Terror. Resources were immediately allocated to the War on Terror and rationally speaking, the amount of money invested and the potential lost made little sense; but it made political sense at the time.

Workman et al. (2009) proposed that when a system experiences a disproportionate injection of information in reaction to an external shock, it fosters two different dynamics. First, error accumulation where other areas of the system are completely ignored and the government is not responsive to new information for the policy agenda. Or second, error correction, where the government re-evaluates the effectiveness of the system but through the lens of the crisis and how all departments need to prepare for the future (Workman et al., 2009). With that being said, what happened within the United States represents a very extreme case.

Trans-Boundary Agenda Setting

Aging related concerns is a daunting subject for policymakers all around the world, it is due to the fact that it spans multiple departments, has a tremendous impact on economic and societal costs, and is a long-term commitment that may not yield immediate results to facilitate a possible re-election. This is called trans-boundary agenda setting, where an issue – aging – spans across multiple disciplines and will require several continuous collaborations (Pump, 2011). A distinct characteristic of the Canadian government and most governments for that matter is that they are extremely comfortable with short-term goals that yield quick outcomes. Trans-boundary policy problems such as aging do not lead to an easy road onto the policy agenda. Although subsystems are rooting for the same cause – to improve the lives of seniors – the nature of trans-boundary policy problems causes subsystems to retaliate against other subsystems to highlight their particular perception of the problem and set the agenda (Pump, 2011). Even if aging was to appear onto a policy agenda, there are many conflicting interests in terms of departmental challenges that a municipality will face when implementing a local initiative such as the Age-Friendly Communities project (Jochim & May, 2010). Aging related projects will often span across many departments of a municipality. Each of which will be competing for resources to accommodate the addition of aging related services, such as making transit more accessible. A common strategy usually deployed by elite policy actors is the notion of public opinion and mass opinion. Mass public opinion can act as an external constraint and potentially cause an internal shock to the system that may allow policymakers to gain agenda access (Pump, 2011). Conversely, this could be an uphill battle for policymakers if there is a lack of interest and/or negative activity caused by other subsystems competing for the same agenda access.

Comparative study of Age-Friendly London and the Older Adult Plan from the City of Mississauga

The following are two local initiatives that revolve around the issue of aging, both with the goal of providing services in the hopes of improving the quality of life for older adults residing within that community. Each initiative illustrates some general elements of the agenda setting process. However, both differ substantially and encountered different challenges. The purpose of comparing these two initiatives is to analyze theory versus practice and to understand and visualize what happens on the local level to ultimately reach a more age-friendly society as a whole. Moreover, it is to gain insight into the actual process of agenda setting not captured through documents.

Case Study #1 - Age-Friendly London

Over the past few years, the City of London has been a rather attractive destination for older adults to come and retire. With the ebb and flow of university students in and out of London, the older adult population continues to increase. Over the last decade, London's overall population increased less than 1%, while the number of individuals 60 and over increased by 11% (Age-Friendly London, 2010). This number is going to continue to rise and the City has recognized the need for more policies and programs dedicated to the aging population.

In 2008, the City of London created the Age-Friendly Cities Working Group. Its mandate was to create a more age-friendly London based on the criteria set forth by the World Health Organization. This working group represented a multitude of disciplines and individuals very much dedicated to improving the lives of older adults. Together, the working group sought input from community members, academics, and most importantly, older adults to understand where London needed improve and what needed to be done to make London more age-friendly.

In 2009, the working group organized a daylong conference where they engaged in dialogue with older adults to identify what they enjoyed about London but also where London can improve in terms of being more accessible and age-friendly. As a result, the Age-Friendly London Report to the Community was created to illustrate some of the pressing issues and challenges older adults experience while living in London. This report gave council and staff a solid foundation to start building and achieving a city that is age-friendly. After the publishing of this report, council recommended that the working group apply to the World Health Organization's Global Network for Age-Friendly Cities. And as a result, the City of London was the first municipality in Canada to be accepted into the World Health Organization's Global Network for Age-Friendly Cities.

The Age-friendly London initiative depicted many elements of the agenda setting process proposed by theories. However, the interviews revealed that there are details that cannot be captured through theories, and where in practice, it is important to expect the unexpected. Age-Friendly London's success was largely dependent on the fact that they had a political champion. Not many municipalities have the opportunity or are fortunate enough to have a champion, let alone someone who is highly involved within council chambers. Gina Barber, former Controller for the City of London, was the political champion who brought the concept of age-friendliness to the city. It is important to note that a majority of the population in general, understand that population aging is going to have a tremendous impact on society. However, it requires the leadership of an individual or of a group of advocates to open an often parochial, fiscally conservative local government to the notion of age-friendly initiatives. Although having a champion is not mandatory, a champion usually has the passion and ability to bring an idea to the next level and to push for change. Gina Barber has been regarded as the driving force behind Age-Friendly London, and the following quotations illustrate how influential her involvement was and it depicts the importance of a champion:

"Gina Barber, she was the political lead and the driving force. By putting together the committee, holding public consultations, developing the conference - she put it on the political agenda."

- City Of London Employee #1

"She really set things up to move forward, and she took advantage of what was already in place for seniors. She gave it that traction that was needed for change."

- City of London Employee #2

Regardless of the topic, getting onto the policy agenda is not easy, especially for social policies such as aging. There is always a resistance to change, venturing into the unknown. With aging related issues as a platform, public and media backlash is inevitable, because focusing on seniors brings forth criticism about a city's vitality and talent retention. However, it is also a topic that is gaining more positive public momentum as governments are starting to feel the strain imposed by increased public expenditures and negative public perception of the lack of resources for this vulnerable population. It can be assumed that municipally, councils will become more receptive to aging related policies because of the impact it has on the entire corporation, which could be an indicating factor that the policy window is wide open for change toward a more age-friendly community. Moreover, it is recognized that local governments play a significant role in the delivery of programs and services on the ground level.

While the need for a champion is not mandatory, there is no doubt that having a champion can enable the creation of a strong policy subsystem and communicate the possibility of something better. Having a champion can provide the traction needed for an initiative such as Age-Friendly London to get onto the policy radar. This is one item not so much illustrated in theories. Academics recognize that having a champion is better than not having one, however, they do not emphasize their significance and the roles they represent. Although the roles of a champion differ in accordance to the issue at hand and the demographics of a certain community, generally, a champion's purpose is to be the backbone, and also to be the advocate to broaden out the scope of the project to encompass the community as a whole. In practice, many believe that having a champion and particularly having a political champion is key to successfully changing the path of the agenda, but as the City of Mississauga will illustrate, having an invested

council and a city that is bought into the idea is just as important if not more, to get onto the policy agenda and stay there.

A part of what the theories describe regarding agenda setting really emphasizes the notion of a shock – breaking the equilibrium. When a council and/or the community as a whole needs convincing, a champion(s) must understand the hardships that faces a policy subsystem and what mechanisms must be utilized to get noticed. One of these mechanisms is through media. This viral connection connects every facet of society, and it is a critical device of communication for policy subsystems, community members, and politicians to voice and monitor social processes, which in turn, as Baumgartner and Jones (1993) proposed, become political inputs within the policy cycle. For this occasion, as a politician, Gina Barber has this “celebrity status” if you will, to capture the attention of media, the public, and the staff to get items on the board. However, there is one major event that stood out, a window of opportunity or as some skeptics may think as just a matter of coincidence and being at the right at the right time. One of the City of London employees thought back to how it all started. She described how the champion engaged the community, and took every opportunity that arose to gain media attention and increase public awareness about age-friendly communities and the consequences of population aging. TVO’s “The Agenda” happened to come to London to film an episode in response to the aging demographics. She described her opportunity to speak and promote to the residents of London her plans to make London an age-friendly community. To her surprise, the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) of the City was in attendance, and was very interested in the concept. As a result, funds were allocated to create the working group and subsequently, the report to the community was published. This report is the foundation of Age-Friendly London, and will be used as tool as London progresses to become a more age-friendly community. It is evident that she was in the

right place at the right time, and utilizing a media opportunity to gain considerable traction with Age-Friendly London. It is safe to assume that this was an egregious moment, and the spark that was required to set the fire. There is no theory that exists to indicate when and where the window of opportunity lies. Rather, it takes dedication and tremendous commitment on the part of the champion to engage the public and push the envelope. As one City of London employee described:

“Gina went 100% beyond her role as councilor, she put her heart and soul into making citizens, staff, and fellow councilors understand the severity of population aging and the need to take action.”

- City of London Employee #3

It is very important to accentuate the prominence of the media and how much of an impact they have within the policy cycle. As illustrated, within the policy cycle, emergent trends and issues become political inputs. Governments will use these inputs as resources to monitor what occurs within their community and what to anticipate in the near future. In this case, it could be said that the CAO observed and analyzed this concept of age-friendliness – the emergent trend, and utilized his authority to prompt a political input, which then entered into the policy cycle and sifted through the policy process.

Consequently, although it may appear that it was a very smooth process, it was never without its challenges. As part of the policy process for any social policies, but especially for aging related issues, there is the concern in regards to sustainability. Aging is a trans-boundary, multifaceted, and dynamic social issue. It spans over numerous disciplines and departments, and most of all, it is a long-term commitment that

requires a sustainable strategic outlook to enforce the aging related item to remain on the policy agenda. In the case of Age-Friendly London, applying to the WHO Global Age-Friendly Cities Network was a strategic decision and also a decision used to illustrate to residents the City's commitment to becoming age-friendly. However, the answer to the question of whether or not this was a strategy to enforce sustainability, varied greatly from employees of the policy realm to frontline employees working to implement the initiative. Nonetheless, such an accreditation whether to get on the policy agenda or to maintain its status on the agenda does not hurt an organization. What does, is a change within the political environment.

Academics studying politics or public administration understand the impact the political environment has on government structures, whether it be on the federal, provincial, territorial, or municipal level, a change in political leadership can imply that the equilibrium will be disturbed. The disturbance of the equilibrium was described before as window of opportunity for new items to appear on the policy agenda. In specific reference, it was an opportunity for aging related issues to get onto the political agenda. However, in retrospect, it is an opportunity for all policy concerns to try and gain access onto the coveted agenda space. Therefore, every time equilibrium is disturbed, election time for example, the system becomes unstable and unpredictable. In the 2010 municipal elections, Gina Barber was not re-elected into council and as a result, many of the activities associated with Age-Friendly London stopped. In addition, London elected a new mayor who pledged to have a zero tax percent increase, putting even more strain on the City's budget. Within an unstable environment, aging related issues suffer from the lack of continuity. Moreover, because there is no longer a political champion or a mayor that endorsed the project on council, the progress of Age-Friendly London came to a halt. The continuity that once existed was no longer there, and without a permanent

employee position designated to oversee age-friendly initiatives, it was difficult for this new fiscally conservative council to envision age-friendly projects over more economically rational decisions. However, the international accreditation posed to be a very good strategic move to keep Age-Friendly London on the agenda, since in three years the City of London will have to demonstrate to the WHO as to why they still deserve this international recognition. As a result, the City has designated one employee to act as the liaison between the City and community organizations to ensure London will meet international expectations.

The overall process of Age-Friendly London proved that there are significant advantages and disadvantages to having a political champion. In addition, having an unstable environment, where equilibrium is always being redefined does not produce an environment that can foster sustainable policies. Conversely, a very critical factor of this initiative is its international accreditation, which has imposed obligatory regulations onto the City to maintain the standards set for by the WHO. If it had not been for this obligation, within a changing and unstable political environment such as London, it is difficult to predict whether or not Age-Friendly London would still exist. This initiative illustrated some agenda setting mechanisms proposed by theories, however, there were many instances that cannot be explained nor defined within theories, for example, the windows of opportunities and predicting a complete change in council. It will be interesting to observe in the next few years the roll out of Age-Friendly London, and how they plan on achieving a more age-friendly city.

Case Study #2 – City of Mississauga Older Adult Plan

The Older Adult Plan of the City of Mississauga is very different from the Age-Friendly London Initiative. Although both wish to fulfill the goal of being a city that is suitable for all ages, the Older Adult Plan focuses on the city as a holistic entity where every department must work as a synergetic system to produce policies and programs that address the fundamentals of age-friendliness. The City has taken the approach to creating such a plan to help guide staff, decision-makers, stakeholders and the general public in identifying and understanding the needs of older adults and how to strategically plan for a rapidly aging demographic (City of Mississauga, 2008). It is predicted that in 2030, the proportion of the population 55 year and older will reach 38% in Mississauga. That is a significant statistic, and as a result, the Older Adult plan was created in 2008 to provide a future-oriented guide for the City and its community to become age-friendly within the next 10 years.

The plan is a responsive action plan that is built on a strong foundation of research, public consultation, demographic profiling, inventory of programs and services, and evaluating existing best practices and policies. In 2007, the City prescribed extensive consultation efforts with seniors, stakeholders, and staff to effectively gauge what the City needed to improve. The report captures items such as what were the barriers that seniors often faced, for example, transportation and cultural services, how to improve access to services and increase social participation, and how can community and staff members better promote social and political engagement, and aging in place. In addition to public consultations, the City evaluated and documented best practices, which provided benchmarks for the Older Adult Plan based on effective existing practices. The plan contains ten goals that address a range of services and community wide improvements to make the city more age-friendly. In addition, to ensure the City

supports its stakeholders, senior residents, and community organizations, the Older Adult Advisory Committee (OAAC) was created to assist in the implementation of the Older Adult Plan. It is also intended that the OAAC would act as a central planning party to hold and coordinate an annual forum with older adult service providers, community organizations and the Older Adult Transportation Sub-Committee to ensure that the city as a whole moves forward into becoming age-friendly. Furthermore, evaluating and coming together annually will allow the city to determine a set of measures to foster continual improvement, but also provide an opportunity for organizations to learn from each other about current best practices.

One very important element of the Older Adult Plan is the Older Adult Coordinator. This is what sets Mississauga apart from other municipalities in regards to age-friendly initiatives. The creation of this position is not only in response to the rapid increase in the older adult population, but also recognizing the need for constant communication between stakeholders and community members with the City itself. The staff member will assist the OAAC and other sub-committees within the City to ensure the City of Mississauga is addressing seniors issues on all fronts and in every single department. In addition, this staff member will act as a representative of the City, but also be the voice for community organizations hoping to raise a particular issue. Generating such a position indicates the City's commitment, but also provides a sense of stability. It indicates to the community that this plan will continue to move forward because the entire city is engaged and connected through the coordinator – maintaining the equilibrium. Referring back to Baumgartner and Jones (1993), where changes in the agenda are often caused by shocks to the system. They also described that the policy cycle can be quite incremental and predictable in nature when sustained in equilibrium

and not disturbed by an external source. The City of Mississauga's Older Adult Plan perfectly depicts the impact of a stable environment on the agenda setting process.

The City of Mississauga council is unique. It is the largest municipality in Canada to have a majority female council, with six out of the 11 being female. In addition, with the longest serving elected leader in history, Hazel McCallion known as "Hurricane Hazel", has been a driving force in providing the City with the stability it exudes. McCallion is not alone; council itself has remained pretty stable over the last few elections, with the exception of two councilors joining the board in the 2010. Although the political environment is never really "stable", having a long standing council and a representative such as McCallion can play a significant role in how the City views priorities and how they are going to move forward into becoming more age-friendly. The Older Adult plan is aligned with the City's strategic plan, which reflects the City's commitment to address the interests of older adults over time. Moreover, it keeps aging related issues on the map and ensures that elements of the plan are intertwined within all departments and is considered throughout the budgetary process. This illustrates the incremental and predictable nature of agenda setting. With a city such as Mississauga, having a plan specially designed for older adults embedded into a strategic plan can allow policymakers to predict and analyze the best "next step". Likewise, there is essentially no need for a "shock" or pressure to be imposed by a policy subsystem to push for aging to appear on the policy agenda. However, that is not to say that policy subsystems will not appear, rather, they may not be as aggressive in putting an item onto the policy agenda. This is one of the very reasons why the City of Mississauga is so successful at addressing aging related issues.

Mentioned prior, programs and services for older adults can be a very daunting task because of its long-term commitment. And many fail to remain on the policy agenda

due to the municipality's lack of commitment or failure in planning for future needs of a municipality. By having the Older Adult plan as part of the City's strategic plan ensures that the entire city is committed to making their community more age-friendly. In addition, dedicating a staff member to oversee the plan can make a significant difference in how the City actually achieves the goal of being age-friendly. Since at the end of the date, policies and programs are most effective when implemented on a local level. With all these elements in place, the City of Mississauga is well equipped to gain international accreditation from the World Health Organization. The City will apply to join the Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities in 2012. Additionally, it is much easier for the City to maintain that status due to the fact that "age-friendly" has been instilled into administration but also within council. Together, they both speak the same language and understand what the foundational items are and how as a corporation they can achieve that goal. In many municipalities, this is a very difficult task due to the complex nature of this vulnerable population. The notion of trans-boundary agenda setting is probably the biggest challenge in regards to getting aging related issues on the municipal policy agenda. It takes tremendous dedication and understanding to align the mental models of senior and frontline staff, in order to move forward as a city as opposed to operating in silos, which could be detrimental to becoming age-friendly.

With that being said, the power of buy-in is so critical to the agenda setting process, since at the end of the day, buy-in from council is a must. Depending on the context and the political environment at the time, policy subsystems and/or champions have to dedicate a substantial amount of time to engage the community and create public awareness for a certain cause. In which case, with enough support, a champion and/or policy subsystem can gain the attention of the City and its councilors to push for change. Conversely, the Older Adult Plan was an *idea* in response to the aging

demographic. There were no champions and specifically, no political champion. Staff took on the role to conduct research and public consultations to address and anticipate the future needs of older adults.

“The Older Adult Plan was a result of an idea derived from staff to conduct research and consultation. The report was brought forth to council in 2008, and a coordinator was hired in 2009 – that was a pivotal point of the project”.

- City of Mississauga Employee

#1

In recognizing the need to address the City’s aging demography, the report to council was a catalyst for the Older Adult Plan and enabled this item to remain on the policy agenda and for years to come. The agenda setting process can be a very difficult process, and yet, what occurred in Mississauga illustrates that even without the presence of an external pressure, getting onto the policy agenda can be relatively fluid when everyone acknowledges the consequences of not implementing such a plan.

The Older Adult Plan addresses every aspect of seniors’ lives and recognizes that interdepartmental collaboration is required to successfully implement the plan and becoming a community that is age-friendly. The City of Mississauga is a very unique case of agenda setting. It illustrates that within a stable environment, the agenda setting process is indeed incremental and predictable in nature. Moreover, such an environment can facilitate initiatives dedicated to aging. The trans-boundary nature of this population and the policy and programs that serve them thrive best within an environment that can follow through with its commitments, with no rapid changes in priorities, and an understanding that part of the foundation to successfully implementing aging-related initiatives is continuity. Unfortunately, that is easier said than done, and many initiatives fall through as a result of changes in government or lack of commitment. Which was

illustrated in the City of London, when the political champion was not re-elected, and ironically, her platform was age-friendly communities. In a perfect world, all municipalities should have plans similar to the Older Adult Plan. However, it is a rarity to have such continuity and stability within a municipality. To date, the Older Adult Plan is continually used as an example of success. By addressing the needs from the grassroots enabled the City to thrive and adequately address the needs of older adults.

Conclusion

The notion of aging related policies and programs are not always the most politically attractive, and unfortunately, as result, it is very difficult for some municipalities to address their aging population. Nonetheless, regardless of the municipality and the preconceived notions of aging related issues, many theories have captured some critical characteristics of the agenda setting process. Each municipality documented here has illustrated many of those elements and the difficulties that each of them faces.

The City of London illustrated the consequences of an unstable environment and its impact on the initiative. But it also demonstrated the importance of a champion and how such an individual can secure and identify the “window of opportunity”. Theories essentially identify how things are supposed to operate, and many of those theoretical concepts were utilized within the City of London. Theories mentioned the role of social monitoring through media and how interpretations become political inputs, which are part of the policy cycle. It is evident that the champion of Age-Friendly London took the opportunity through media to engage the public. And as a result, managed to engage and entice more than just residents. Although the overall status of Age-Friendly London is slowly progressing, it was identified through interviews, that the City would dedicate a staff member to focus on Age-Friendly London. Such a position is crucial to the sustainability of aging related issues and how the city can effectively manage such as diverse subject matter.

There are some recommendations to be made. Due to the infancy of this position, it would be in the best intension of the City to look at how Mississauga has utilized its coordinator and how they can appropriately define the role of this staff member. Although having a position is important, defining the roles and responsibilities is just as critical. Another recommendation to put forward is the international

accreditation. The City has a responsibility to achieve certain criteria of what the WHO defines as being age-friendly. Being the first municipality to be acknowledged is a very prestigious recognition, however, many municipalities may look to the City for best practices since it was the first in Canada to hold such an accreditation. Unfortunately, unlike Mississauga the City has yet to establish solid components and action plans to achieve and maintain their age-friendly status. By applying to the Global Network first holds its pros and cons. The City will now be under considerable pressure to indicate to the WHO why they still deserve their accreditation, and what actions plans they have in place to prove they are continuously becoming more age-friendly.

While, the initial champion of this project is still in the loop and is still a very active member within the community, the City is still in need of a champion who will continuously challenge the potential of Age-Friendly London and push it to new heights. It would be critical for the City to define a clear direction and conduct further research into best practices, and continue with community engagement to gather the interests of community organizations who could potentially be champions of Age-Friendly London. The overall plan for Age-Friendly London seems to be on a positive track towards action and policy changes. It will no doubt remain on the policy agenda due to its international accreditation. However, whether or not they will be able to sustain this recognition is left to the City.

Ironically, without the motivation of an international organization, the City of Mississauga's Older Adult Plan managed to be one of the most successful age-friendly initiatives in Ontario. The major difference between Mississauga and London is due to the fact that this plan exists in a relatively stable environment. Theory suggests that shifts in the agenda usually occur due to a shock to the system. With the absence of a disruption, the agenda setting process is quite predictable and incremental in nature,

which is the experience in Mississauga. With a stable and consistent council, the initiative will continue to be a priority because council and staff understand the consequences associated with population aging. Even with the absence of a champion, the level of buy-in that exists within the City is tremendous and has been regarded as a pivotal factor to the success of the Older Adult Plan. In addition, having a permanent older adult coordinator differentiates this plan to any other age-friendly project, in that it ensures that the City is aligned with the community and vice versa. Although the City of London has just recently appointed this position, it will require time to achieve what Mississauga has achieved by creating this position at the infancy of the project.

With that being said, Mississauga has established a very strong foundation of programs and policies dedicated to improving the lives of older adults. With this initiative embraced by the City's strategic plan, it will be sustainable and remain on the policy agenda for years to come. To continue to move forward, the City should and will most likely apply to become a part of the Global Network. With this recognition, it may continue to bring community organizations together and thus, allow the City to become more innovative and hopefully serve and reach more residents.

The Age-Friendly London initiative and the City of Mississauga's Older Adult Plan illustrated many elements of the agenda setting process proposed in theories. Fundamentals such as the influences on the policy cycle, emergent trends, disturbances to the system, the impact of media, and the power of a champion were evident within each case study. Each initiative had its strengths and weaknesses, and each took a very different approach to set the agenda for their age-friendly project. With Mississauga striving for international recognition, while London seeks to maintain theirs, it would be interesting to analyze in a couple of years to see how each municipality has progressed, and whether theory can still be used to explain what occurred in each municipality.

Ageing related initiatives such as the ones depicted demonstrates that many social issues, especially social policies directed towards the ageing population, are initiatives that must be activated on the local level and governed by the local government. Both the governments of London and Mississauga are key players to the success and also the failures of age-friendly initiatives, which allowed for good comparative analysis. London illustrated what occurs within an unstable environment, while Mississauga illustrated the opposite. These case studies portrayed what theories seek to explain – the harmony that exists between practice and theory.

Bibliography

- Australian Local Government Association. (2006). *Age-friendly built environment: opportunities for local government*. Retrieved: <http://www.sortclearinghouse.info/research/17/>
- Baumgartner, F.R., & Jones B.D. (1993). *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Baumgartner, F.R., Breunig, C., Green-Pedersen, C., Jones, B.D., Mortensen, P.B., Nuytemans, M., & Walgrave, S. (2009). Punctuated Equilibrium in Comparative Perspective. *American Journal of Political Science*, 53(3). 603-620.
- City of London. (2010). *Age-Friendly London*. Retrieved: <http://www.london.ca/d.aspx?s=/Seniors/agefriendlycity.htm>.
- City of London. (2010). *Age-Friendly London: Report to the Community*. Retrieved: <http://www.london.ca/Seniors/pdf/afl-report.pdf>.
- Elder, C.D., & Cobb, R.W. (1984). Agenda-Building and the Politics of Aging. *Policy Studies Journal*, 13(1). 115-129.
- Jones, M.D., & Jenkins-Smith, H.C. (2009). Trans-System Dynamics: Policy Topography, Mass Opinion, and Policy Change. *Policy Studies Journal*, 37(1), 37-58.
- Lockett, B.A. (1984). Setting the Federal Agenda for Health Research: The Case of the National Institute on Aging. *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, 9(1). 63-80.
- Lui, C.W., Everingham, J., Warburton, J., Cuthill, M., & Barlett, H. (2009). What makes a Community Age-Friendly: A Review of International Literature. *Australasian Journal on Ageing*, 28(3). 116-121.
- May, P.J., Workman, S., & Jones, B.D. (2008). Organization Attention: Responses of the Bureaucracy to Agenda Disruption. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 18. 517-541.

- Mortensen, P.B. (2010). Political Attention and Public Policy: A Study of how Agenda Setting Matters. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 33(4). 356-380.
- Pump, B. (2011). Beyond Metaphors: New Research on Agendas in the Policy Process. *Policy Studies Journal*, 39(S1). 1-12.
- Statistics Canada. 2006. *A Portrait of Seniors in Canada*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-519-XIE. Ottawa.
- Workman, S., Jones, B.D., & Jochim, A.E. (2009). Information Processing and Policy Dynamics. *Policy Studies Journal*, 37(1). 75-92.
- World Health Organization. (2011). *WHO Age-Friendly Environments Program*. Retrieved: http://www.who.int/ageing/age_friendly_cities/en/index.html.