

Boomer home-bodies: Accommodating those who age in place

'Wanting to stay put isn't new among the old -- what's new are the 76 million boomers approaching Golden Pond'

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By BOB MOOS / The Dallas Morning News

Ask baby boomers where they'll spend their golden years, and retirement meccas like Florida and the Ozarks aren't at the top of their lists.

Instead, they mention places such as Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Bloomington, Ind.; or Abilene.

About eight in 10 boomers say they want to stay in their homes and close to family and friends as long as possible, according to a recent survey by AARP.

That prospect is prompting city planning and design experts to think about how to make communities more hospitable, or livable, for older residents.

"The desire of tens of millions of baby boomers to live out their lives in their own homes is going to change the face of this country," said Robert McNulty, president of the Washington-based Partners for Livable Communities and a leading proponent of "aging in place."

Some changes will be obvious, such as innovative home designs that allow older residents to remain independent long past the age when their parents felt they had to move into retirement homes.

Those redesigned homes will have wider doors and hallways, lower cabinets and light switches, and bathrooms with grab bars and elevated toilets, Mr. McNulty says.

Other changes will be less noticeable, such as street signs with larger lettering and traffic lights that give pedestrians more time to clear crosswalks.

"Wanting to stay put isn't new among the old – what's new are the 76 million boomers approaching Golden Pond," said Dr. Thomas Fairchild, director of special projects on aging at the University of North Texas Health Science Center in Fort Worth.

Within a decade, 10,000 boomers will turn 65 each day, and by 2030, 20 percent of the nation's population will be 65 or older, compared with just 12 percent today.

The demographic tidal wave has pushed government agencies, nonprofit groups and philanthropic foundations to create pilot projects to prepare communities for the larger elderly population.

Proponents of aging in place expect the movement to gain momentum next year at the White House Conference on Aging, where policy-makers will discuss how the nation will accommodate retired baby boomers.

Making communities more elder-friendly will be one of AARP's major initiatives over the next decade, says Candice Carter, the group's associate state director.

The organization has launched a pilot project in El Paso, where it's meeting with community leaders to help them adapt to one of the fastest-growing senior populations in the country.

"We hope that what we learn in El Paso will be a model for other communities," Ms. Carter said.

Edward Espinoza, a project coordinator for the Rio Grande Council of Governments, says the initiative will draw on the community's tradition of one generation helping another.

Aging-in-place programs may get a toehold in the Dallas-Fort Worth area soon.

Dr. Fairchild, who serves on the Tarrant County Commission on Aging, expects at least one Tarrant County city to begin a pilot project next year if it gets foundation funding.

Common threads

There are common threads to the elder-friendly projects in cities such as Tucson, Ariz., Battle Creek, Mich., and Jacksonville, Fla. The need for affordable housing figures prominently in many of those communities.

The AARP says some communities are amending their zoning regulations to allow "accessory apartments" within or attached to single-family houses. Older residents then can remain in their homes and use the apartment rent to help pay their property taxes.

"Elder cottages," or "granny flats," as they're sometimes called, are also sprouting up in back yards. Essentially, they're small, portable homes for Mom and Dad. Sons and daughters can lease an elder cottage from a community nonprofit group, place it behind their house and remove it when it's no longer needed.

"Many zoning ordinances now prohibit granny flats, but they may become an option for the future," Dr. Fairchild said.

Though Dallas doesn't have a comprehensive aging-in-place program, a nonprofit group called Friends of Senior Affairs is looking at ways to provide assisted-living facilities for seniors who can't afford high-priced retirement settings.

Board member Pauline Kress says many of Dallas' seniors need a lower-cost alternative. A recent study found that the average cost of an assisted-living center in Dallas is \$2,361 a month, or \$28,332 a year.

Another part of the senior housing quandary has more to do with the physical than the fiscal.

Many homes weren't built with aging residents in mind and have physical limitations, says Richard Lusky, chairman of the applied gerontology department at the University of North Texas.

As a class exercise, the professor asks his students to visit houses for sale and assess their suitability for older people.

"They discover doorways that are too narrow, doorknobs instead of door levers, and bathtubs that are too difficult to step into," he said.

Many of the aging-in-place projects are working to identify economical ways to modify houses, especially kitchens and bathrooms, for older residents.

"The challenge will be to set up store discount programs or find low-interest financing for seniors needing home modifications," Ms. Carter said.

Transportation is also a focus of aging-in-place projects.

"You can't fend for yourself if you can't get around town," said Elli Dalrymple, a program officer with Partners for Livable Communities.

The auto remains the most popular means of transportation for seniors. Eighty percent of people ages 75 to 84 drive, as do 60 percent of those 85 and older, according to an AARP survey.

So some communities are installing larger-lettered signs and brighter street lights to make themselves more elder-friendly.

Yet failing health eventually forces many older people to quit driving, and communities will need to find other ways to get them to the grocery store and doctor appointments.

Dr. Fairchild cautions that "senior transit means more than good bus routes."

Larger cities have fleets of specially equipped vehicles for older or disabled riders, but smaller communities may have to depend on school buses and church vans to keep seniors mobile, Ms. Carter says.

Promoting mobility among seniors also means encouraging walking.

"There are health benefits to this, but communities need to provide benches and properly lighted walking paths," Ms. Dalrymple said.

Everyone benefits

In the end, Ms. Dalrymple says, seniors won't be the only ones who benefit from livable communities.

"The entire community stands to gain from older people who stay engaged in civic affairs," she said. "If seniors can get out and about, they can be mentors at the neighborhood school and volunteers at the local food bank."

Partners for Livable Communities says 45 percent of people over 65 volunteer annually, donating 1.8 billion hours of their expertise, worth \$22.7 billion.

At the moment, the aging-in-place pilot programs add up to only a few dots on the national map. But proponents believe the idea will become standard in cities' strategic plans.

One potential stumbling block is cost. Everyone recognizes that government alone won't be able to pay for all the changes needed to accommodate aging boomers. But no one knows exactly where the money will come from.

"It's going to have to be through public-private partnerships," Ms. Carter said.

Aging-in-place advocates such as Mr. McNulty predict that 76 million boomers will express themselves through AARP and similar groups and use their influence to change the political calculus to their advantage.

As for himself, Mr. McNulty, at 64, intends to practice what he preaches and grow old in the small Maryland community where he lives.

Family history gives him reason to think his chances are excellent. His 97-year-old mother only recently moved into a nursing home.

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Resources

These agencies or organizations are sponsoring pilot projects to help older Americans remain in their homes or communities. You can learn more about their aging-in-place initiatives on their Web sites:

AARP: www.aarp.org

National Association of Area Agencies on Aging: www.n4a.org

Partners for Livable Communities: www.livable.com

U.S. Administration on Aging: www.aoa.gov