Preparing for the Coming Age Waves: Clark County, Washington’s Planning Approach

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Never before in our history have people lived so long. Older adults have many names – baby boomers, silver tsunami, elders, seniors. As the baby boom generation – those born 1946-1964 – reaches retirement age, one in four Clark County, Washington residents will be 60 or better.

However, our aging society is not just about baby boomers. Generation X will likely live longer as will the Millennial Generation. It is said that the boomers will be an introduction to what will be a permanent shift in the aging of our communities. This major demographic shift will shape all communities in the 21st century.

Aging Readiness Task Force

Anticipating challenges locally, Clark County appointed a 24-member task force administered by the county’s long-range planning department. The task force was charged with assessing the county’s capacity to serve the approaching silver tsunami. The group examined whether we are ready for such growth and developed recommendations on how we could prepare.

Through an extensive public outreach process, the task force asked residents whether Clark County will be livable for them as they grow older. Would they continue to be able to live independently in their homes and neighborhoods? The task force welcomed ideas about what changes were needed to ensure residents could remain in their homes as active, engaged community members as they age.

Aging Readiness Plan

The task force developed the Aging Readiness Plan that identifies 91 strategies focusing on healthy communities, housing, transportation and mobility, supportive services and community engagement. The plan’s goal is to improve the quality of life in all our communities. It further provides leadership to accomplish this through existing regional collaboration and heightened public engagement.

Part of that leadership provision was the recommendation to create a Commission on Aging to lead the implementation of the plan and to be advocates towards initiating change for an all-age-friendly, livable community.

Meeting first in June 2012, the nine-member group established working committees comprised of commission members, community stakeholders and volunteers. In its first year, the commission clocked in over 975 volunteer hours, completing six strategies of the plan with another 39 under way.
Aging in urban, suburban and rural communities

Realistically, most communities built in the past several decades were not designed for aging-in-place. In Clark County, the majority of older people live in suburbs and rural areas where little or no public transportation exists and they must rely on the automobile. In short, the same neighborhoods that were wonderful places to grow up may prove to be unsuitable places to grow old.

The task force took into consideration that many of our aging residents will live in areas far from services they require. Future transportation services may not be able to accommodate that growing need. The Aging Readiness Plan provides innovative solutions to help urban, suburban and rural residents to age-in-place.

Examples of age readiness strategies in play

**Telehealth:** TeleHealth is a term that means to provide healthcare distantly using technology. The TeleHealth concept will be essential in our rural communities, where traveling to see a doctor could be reduced by using computer technology.

**Universal Green Design:** Universal Green Design is a long-term approach to building and remodeling. It combines environmentally sustainable elements of green building with the flexibility of universal design. The goal is simple: make products and places adaptable to people of all shapes, sizes and abilities. Adding universal design to green building seemed logical. Although a home might be environmentally friendly and energy efficient, it isn't sustainable if the resident can no longer live there because of accessibility limitations.

**Volunteer sidewalk program:** Many suburban neighborhoods in Clark County were built without sidewalks. This program would allow volunteers to build sidewalks and walking paths using alternative materials other than concrete. The commission has been working with Public Works to research the feasibility of this program and create a demonstration project next year in unincorporated Clark County.

**Time-banking:** A time bank is a form of community currency that is based on time rather than dollars. Requests (withdrawals) are made from a large selection of available services offered by members. All hours are valued equally and earned and withdrawn on an hour-for-hour basis. With neighbors helping neighbors, we all build a stronger, more connected community.

Age readiness planning and land use policy

The Aging Readiness Plan is a comprehensive assessment of the livability of our communities, similar to a comprehensive plan. Planning staff’s assistance and management of the project was critical to making sure planning principles and other public objectives, such as public health, transportation and environmental policies were observed and incorporated when appropriate. The new land use policies recommended in the Aging Readiness Plan will be incorporated into Clark County’s 20-year Growth Management Comprehensive Plan update.

For more information about the Commission on Aging and the Aging Readiness plan, please visit the website at [www.clark.wa.gov/aging](http://www.clark.wa.gov/aging)

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