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# Municipalities Must Plan to Meet Needs of Aging Population

Patricia E. Salkin



In his December 2001 column, Paul Bray discussed the tidal wave of seniors approaching. He correctly asserted that the "young elderly" are not going to go quietly into their senior years. Baby boomers will begin reaching the age of 60 in 2005.

According to the State Office for Aging (SOFA), the 60 and older population is projected to remain at 3.1 to 3.2 million until it increased to 3.4 million in 2010 with the first influx of baby boomers. By 2025, the 60 and over population will increase to 4.4 million...a stunning 40% increase over 30 years. In addition to these "young elderly," SOFA predicts that the number of people 85 and older will increase to 390,000 in 2025...an increase of 41% over a 30 year period, and the number of people 75 and over will grow to 1.4 million in the same time period, representing a 32% increase. According to the Administration on Aging, 13.1% of people over age 65 in New York are living in poverty, earning New York a spot on the list of ten states with the highest senior poverty rates (A SOFA study on Housing Older New Yorkers points out that the poverty rate for this population is significantly higher in New York City than the rest of the State).

The million dollar question is "Are local governments ready to meet the changing service demands and challenges of an aging population?" Just over ten years ago, I remember reading a study on non-resident land owners in Delaware County. It was startling how many out-of-county land owners planned to one day leave the metropolitan areas and move into the small rural communities. Many responded

that they planned to build retirement homes on their vacant land in municipalities that had little or no land use controls and zoning. If there was ever a wake-up call to pay attention at the local level to changing and projected demographics, this study was it. To my knowledge, this study has unfortunately not yet been replicated in other counties.

While this brief commentary is focused on the subject of accommodating housing needs of the healthy aging population, all municipalities (working with the county and the regional planning council) should start to conduct community-wide assessments of the projected service needs of the aging population over the next ten to twenty years.

According to a 1992 AARP study, 85% of older adults want to "stay where they are and never move." A number of local governments have started to include special provisions in their zoning laws to meet housing needs. For example, the Village of Amityville has established a senior citizen residence district, and the Village of Massapequa has created a Golden Age Housing zone. The purpose of Massapequa's law is to provide affordable owner-occupied housing for seniors located in sites in close proximity to necessary facilities, service and transportation.

The Town of North Hempstead's authorization for "mother-daughter" residences permits accessory apartment where tenants and the primary residence owner are related. The Town of Ithaca enacted a local law permitting the placement of elder cottages in residential districts as accessory uses subject to certain conditions.

The Town of Carmel authorizes the use of multi-family dwellings for the elderly by special use permit, and the Town of Bedford promotes the availability of affordable housing through its Housing for the Elderly District that requires at least 20% of dwelling units constructed be middle income. Similarly, in the Town of Smithtown's retirement community district, dwellings must be made available at a cost to the tenants below prevailing rental costs in the Town at the time of occupancy.

The desire to "age in place" requires that local governments allow within their laws for a spectrum of housing options for seniors. Many of these options are outlined in a recent Government Law Center report by Fellows Devinder Brar and Bridget Holohan, *Housing Alternatives for an Aging Population: Options for Reform*.

Municipalities are limited only by their own creativity when it comes to planning for and accommodating the range of housing options needed to enable residents to age in place. Local comprehensive land use plans must start to specifically address the needs of the aging population. Integrating senior housing options with effective transportation, service and retail uses will allow for desirable livable mixed-use communities, extending valued independence and quality of life well in the golden years.

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