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'2020' VISION NEEDED TO PREPARE FOR BABY BOOMER RETIREMENT EXPLOSION

by Stephen Wattenbarger, AIA, Wattenbarger Architects, PLLC

The year 2020 is not that far away. What will life be like then, especially for baby boomers?

This is a compelling question for those of us in the older adult housing industry, one we should be thinking about now.

Futurists say we need to consider a broader vision when designing communities for 2020. For those of us in the industry, our approach should be not just as developers and builders but as part social psychologist, gerontologist, outdoor enthusiast and operator, too. Including some of these attributes in your developments will increase your market reach and appeal.

Ken Dychtwald, a well-respected psychologist, gerontologist, author and boomer, told the Senate Committee on Aging in 1999 that “boomers don’t just populate life stages or consumer trends, they transform them.” He said 50-year-olds are going back to school and 70-year-olds are re-inventing themselves through new careers. With all this becoming more commonplace, what’s needed, Dychtwald said is a compelling vision for “what tens of millions of long-lived men and women might do with those additional years.”

HEALTHY AGING

More Americans and more seniors are making healthy lifestyle choices that include regular exercise, recreation, food choices and stress reduction.

Those of us in the seniors housing industry need to expand our thinking to accommodate these lifestyle choices — from community sidewalks and bike trails to fitness centers, swimming pools, recreation programs, healthy food service, outlets for creative expression and mental health resources.

LIFELONG LEARNING

A growing trend in all types of senior housing is designing a community that is linked to a university or college. University-linked senior living provides residents with access to academic programs, cultural events and sporting events. Our challenge as designers is to find effective ways to coordinate educational activities within our communities.

At Lasell Village, a continuing care retirement community planned on the Lasell College campus in Newton, Mass., lifelong learning is a requirement. Residents agree in writing to take a full load of classes — 450-course hours per year. Lasell Village has a waiting list of over 100.

REINVENTING CAREERS

In a recent AARP survey, 75% of Zoomers (AARP’s nickname for boomers) intend to continue working past traditional retirement age either full-time or part-time. Many want to pursue new careers, perhaps dream careers they never had the opportunity to explore.

Home builders can see this trend manifest itself in a growing request for home office space rather than an extra bedroom, or the desire to transform the traditional living room into a “work” space. Home office space is also being designed into independent and assisted living apartments.

For the year 2020, active adult communities might want to have career service professionals available to work with residents, matching part-time consulting opportunities with employers in need of their skills. Similar services could also help residents find internship placements or part-time work that possibly could be linked to college classes.

KEEPING ACTIVE

Inactivity, not age itself, slows us down as we get older. Jon Schick, who owns High Mountain Heli-Skiing in Jackson Hole, Wyo., says that about 10% of his customers are over 55. “Surfing For Life,” a 1999 documentary about older adult surfers featured 10 over-65 surfers from among the hundreds who are active. “They refuse to be curtailed,” says the documentary’s producer, David Brown.

If fitness, exercise and sports participation are not central elements in your community, you are missing a significant marketing opportunity.

VOLUNTEERISM

Many seniors housing communities have volunteer programs for individuals outside the community who want to volunteer their services. Why not have a volunteer coordinator in your community who does the reverse, who seeks and manages volunteer opportunities for residents?

“Prime Time: How Baby Boomers Will Revolutionize Retirement and Transform America,” by Marc Freedman, is filled with examples of how individuals are redefining retirement as a time for “social activism, volunteerism and lifelong learning.”

CREATING A HOLISTIC WELLNESS MINDSET

Senior Lifestyle Corporation (SLC), a Chicago-based developer of innovative senior housing communities, has developed a program called Fit for Life (FFL) around the six dimensions of wellness — physical, social, intellectual, spiritual, emotional and vocational.

The SLC program engages all residents, regardless of the level of support needed, and all SLC employees -- from housekeeping to activity managers -- have key roles to play in the program’s success.

Quail Park in Visalia, Calif., serves the full continuum of care and offers an intergenerational wellness and fitness program that includes health screenings. Quail Park is a joint venture between Living Care, a developer of seniors housing communities, and Kaweah Delta Health Care District, a leading health care provider. The community has a consistent occupancy rate of 97% — 11 points above the industry average.

BE PREPARED

More than just the Boy Scout motto, anticipating that boomers will demand a different retirement from that of their parents and grandparents requires us to think differently, innovatively. Successful builders and their architects will be the ones who look to the future in creative ways, correctly anticipating the needs and wants of their buyers.

2020 is not that far off. Perhaps the easiest way to begin envisioning the future of seniors housing and our roles in its transformation is to consider what we want when we retire.



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