



West St. Paul braces for the 'Silver Tsunami,' embraces senior living program **City has the oldest population per capita in the state of Minnesota.**

Mary Diedrick Hansen
The St. Paul Voice
December 2012

Time marches on, and as much as the Baby Boom generation would like to see it slow down or even go in reverse, that's not going to happen. In 2011 the first of 76 million baby boomers (people born between 1946 and 1964) crossed into seniorhood by turning 65. It is estimated that 10,000 baby boomers will reach the glorious age of 65 each day for the next 20 years. The "Silver Tsunami" has begun.

The Boomer generation is accustomed to using its enormous demographic influence to push society to cater to their needs. Naturally, they will expect the younger generations to cooperate as they confront and attempt to adjust to the challenges of aging: Their expectations for work, housing, active activities and other services will differ from their parents' generation. Health professionals believe that the average boomer who reaches age 65 in reasonable health will remain healthy and active well into his or her 80s, and live a decade beyond.

In West St. Paul, senior provider organizations, businesses, and the city are taking steps to prepare for the aging population. Using Dakota County's "Living longer and Stronger" resident-driven initiative, a group of dedicated senior providers has been meeting for the last 18 months discussing proactive ways to deal with the changing needs and interests of West St. Paul's elderly in finance, health and wellness, housing, transportation, work, community and other services.

They're doing this for good reason. State demographics show that the city's aging population outnumbered both Dakota County and the state of Minnesota. In fact, West St. Paul currently has the oldest population per capita in the state of Minnesota.

Sherri Weiss, communications director at the nonprofit organization DARTS, said the West St. Paul initiative is continuing the work that Dakota County Public Health and DARTS started countywide five years ago. "You want your city to be a place where boomers will want to stay as they age, she said. "You don't want to lose people because another city is more age-friendly." On October 25, a "who's who" of administrators from northern Dakota County social services geared toward seniors, along with residents and City officials, gathered at the Wentworth Library to discuss the strengths and challenges facing West St. Paul as the "age wave" washes over the community for the next five to 15 years.

What they found was that seniors like West St. Paul. The city has many assets that are attractive to an aging population. For one thing, it has a variety of affordable housing options that include three assisted living residences along with many senior housing apartments and affordable county-subsidized apartments. West St. Paul's strong faith community is also attractive. Another amenity is the active Senior Center at Thompson Park, which offers an abundance of programs for seniors.

The group discussed areas that the city needs to work on, including increased public safety, home modification and finding the money to have it done, financial security, attracting new residents to help widen the tax base, driver safety and the lack of medical care in West St. Paul. Don't expect drastic changes immediately as boomers begin to dominate the senior demographic landscape. However, when planning their own futures, businesses, city planners, real estate marketers, houses of worship, and banks should be keenly aware of the needs of an aging population.

For example, Lynn Nasvik of DARTS talked about the planned redesign of Robert Street to make it more pedestrian friendly. It may be a thorn in the side of some business owners, but Nasvik said if they want seniors to venture to the stores the streets need to be safer.

It was suggested that city planners and developers should consider construction of life-cycle homes built to accommodate the needs of homeowners, regardless of their age. These would have a bedroom, bath and laundry on the same floor for those no longer able to climb stairs. How can Boomers modify their current homes? Home remodelers and banks to assist with financing should be gearing up for this forecasted need. Finances and health care are big issues for Boomers.

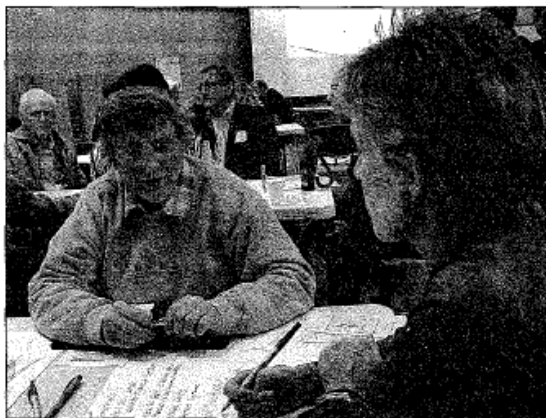
The Dakota County library system is already on it, offering programs on money management, retirement, and Medicare and Medicaid.

The Living Longer and Stronger initiative recognizes that loss of balance is a major health care issue for the elderly. The old TV ad, "I've fallen and I can't get up!" highlights a real issue. Isolation is another serious concern, as is the need to help seniors get out of the house and around in the community.

Naomi Marzinske, president of the Initiative, said the group was trying to get a Circulator bus going when the question of who would pay for insurance arose. It became evident that a funding source was needed. The group has considered becoming a nonprofit, but the process is, to say the least, demanding. The group may try to slide in under the umbrella of another nonprofit in order to acquire funding.

The group intends to print a comprehensive resource guide as well as a calendar of events from all agencies, businesses and organizations working with seniors. The information will also be posted on the city's website.

The Initiative's mission is to make West St. Paul "a community for a lifetime." The group has identified the following characteristic for such a community: a good place to grow up and grow older; a community for people of all ages and abilities that supports health and vitality; access to grocery stores, clinics, shops and cultural activities; walkable neighborhoods with sidewalks and paths for getting around as well as for exercise; a full range of affordable housing options near transportation, shopping, services and parks; flexible and supportive employment and volunteer opportunities, including intergenerational activities; and effective technology, including Skype, telecare, ecare, sensors in homes and GPS devices in clothing and shoes. Planners agree that improvements that benefit older residents positively affect all residents. If you are interested in being part of the discussion, attend a meeting held at 1 p.m. the third Thursday of each month at Thompson Park Community Center.



JoAnn Kuntemeier discusses her thoughts on issues affecting seniors in West St. Paul with Shari Hansen of Neighbors, Inc.