



## Planning for Age-Friendly Communities A Call to Action

June 18, 2009

### Overview

Established in 1986, the Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI) is the recognized voice of the Province's planning profession and provides vision and leadership on key planning issues. The Institute's more than 3,000 members work in government, private practice, universities, and non-profit agencies in the fields of urban and rural development, urban design, environmental planning, transportation, health and social services, heritage conservation, housing, and economic development.

At the Institute's bi-annual Symposium in mid-September 2008, *The Grey Tsunami: Aging Communities and Planning*, members heard from experts from a broad range of disciplines about what to expect as the 'Baby Boomer' generation begins to retire, including predictions that many communities will see profound changes in terms of demand for social services, housing, transportation, and health care, to name but a few. Planners from across the province also had a chance to discuss the challenges they face and gather knowledge about the issues and the resources they will need to lead and manage change associated with Ontario's aging population.

Discussion on the implications of aging and its impact on planning builds upon and complements the highly-regarded and successful initiative that OPPI undertook in 2007 when it released its *Healthy Communities, Sustainable Communities* report. In that document, OPPI looked at, and analyzed, how land use planning decisions can shape us and our environments and have a significant impact on health-related issues, from obesity to air quality. OPPI and its members have committed themselves to creating and fostering healthy and sustainable communities throughout Ontario with an emphasis on the importance of urban design, active transportation, and green infrastructure.

Flowing from discussion at its 2008 Symposium, OPPI has now prepared this position paper highlighting and focusing on some of the key issues and concerns that need to be addressed so that Ontario's planners and communities can respond more effectively to the challenges posed by an aging population. OPPI acknowledges that this issue will cross a range of areas from urban design, community living and long-term care to potential changes in transportation, recreation and infrastructure.

OPPI also sees this change as critical because Ontario's current built environments are not well suited in all cases to address the range of emerging issues being posed by a growing and aging population – the rate of which the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has said is expected to be more rapid in Canada over the next few decades than in other OECD countries.

## Positioning

OPPI believes that planners cannot afford to be taken by surprise. Planners need to keep scanning the horizon and helping to put in place the infrastructure, accommodations, community supports and services necessary for the changing population needs of the future – not just those of today.

Based on presentations made at its 2008 Symposium: *The Grey Tsunami*, OPPI has highlighted and suggested some key areas in which planners can start to prepare for these changes, including:

- Understanding and learning about demographic changes/shifts in society
- Comprehension of health trends and the implications of community-based options
- Rethinking municipal approaches to serve today's – and the future's – aging population
- Paying attention to accessibility legislation
- Considering climate change impacts which may more adversely affect the health of an aging community
- Learning from senior-friendly municipalities and other best practices
- Avoiding traditional stereotypes about older Ontarians

## The Challenge

The face of Canada is quickly becoming remarkably older than the post war community composition for which many of our communities continue to be planned and built. While this trend has been forecasted by demographers for many years, there are important aspects of this grey Tsunami that warrant particular consideration in planning for healthy, age-friendly communities today and over the next decades.

**The Canadian population as a whole is aging and is doing so more quickly than at any time in the past.** The nation aged by 4.2 years from 1996 to reach a median age of 39.5 years by 2006<sup>1</sup>. It is expected that the median age could exceed 44 by 2031. Seniors are the fastest growing age group in the country with very elderly seniors, those over 80, experiencing the largest increase in population (up 25% between 2001-2006). The converse of this is that the younger generations are declining in numbers. As downtowns and urban cores often draw a younger population, this demographic trend is more pronounced in first generation suburbs and outer suburban communities.

**People are living longer yet our population is experiencing high levels of chronic diseases such as diabetes and obesity.** In other words, people are living longer but requiring greater levels of health care. Our health care system is stretched, becoming more centralized and offers a limited range of service models which limit the ability to age in place. Further, although seniors in every generation are likely to experience deteriorating vision or some short-term memory loss, seniors in the future will need to deal with problems such as declining air quality that did not affect previous generations to the same extent. Further, as rates of diabetes and obesity are increasing in

youth, will greater health challenges in the younger generation affect their abilities as caregivers to their parent generation?

**Household composition is changing - soon households with families will comprise a small minority of our communities.** This transition will result in an inverse proportion of single/couple household to couples with children household formation from the post war era. In 1950 half of households were comprised of families with children. In 2006, approximately 33% of households had children. It is anticipated that by 2025 the majority of households will be comprised of singles and couples (22% with children). Are we building the right range of housing and types of housing given this trend<sup>ii</sup>? Many communities are seeing growth being eclipsed by the decline in household formation, thereby resulting in an overall reduction in population.

**Ontario's communities will face different demographic challenges.** According to demographer David Foot, regional and local differences are one area that needs to be considered. Eastern Canada is aging rapidly. Western Canada has more young people learning and working and the North has huge numbers of youth in need of schools. Within Ontario, smaller communities tend to have more seniors because young people leave for education and jobs in larger centres, but the comprehensive health care facilities that the older adults often need are generally found in cities.<sup>iii</sup>

**As Ontario becomes increasingly ethno-culturally diverse, so will its aging population.** Ontario's population growth is being fuelled by immigration. Ontario has the largest immigrant population in Canada: being home to 55% of Canadian immigrants with only 38% of the total Canadian population. Further, the number of immigrants in Ontario increased by close to 10% between 2001 and 2006.<sup>iv</sup> Many ethno-diverse cultures have distinct approaches to caring for their elderly that may indicate that a broader range of care-giver models and services for seniors should be explored. Further, many language barriers may increasingly isolate new Canadians as they grow older. Those who are planning services for ethnic seniors are increasingly aware that these services must take the individuals' culture and language into account<sup>v</sup>.

**Housing options remain limited and many seniors are opting for aging in place in single family housing.** Despite the demographic trends, accommodating growth in most communities relies predominantly on the delivery of greenfield single family housing stock. This form of development comprised a significant majority of new housing constructed in Ontario in 2006. Yet, there remain relatively few options along the spectrum of age-in-place housing for seniors: these include institutionalized homes and seniors only communities. At the same time, new single family housing stock is being constructed to accommodate growth. In Waterloo Region, it is estimated through their growth planning studies that if seniors were to move from single family homes into smaller units, the need for new single family housing would decrease by 50%.<sup>vi</sup>

**Mobility becomes more limited and movement patterns change as we age.** The pivotal moment in lifestyle for many seniors is the moment they are

no longer able to drive. Given the auto-dependent nature of most of our newer and smaller communities, this moment for people implies either greater degrees of isolation, dependence on caregivers or a move to new environments, often outside of the immediate community, given the lack of housing and transit choices. The importance of a walkable, transit-friendly community is becoming increasingly understood for both the young and older population. In a recent US study, the majority of older adults reported inadequate neighbourhood sidewalks and the inability to safely cross main roads close to their home. Many of the respondents reported that they would walk, bicycle or take the bus if these problems were fixed.<sup>vii</sup>

**The workforce is aging.** The face of retirement is changing. Retirement at age 65, for example, was established in an era when people's life spans were shorter, while today some people can expect to live for 30 or more years beyond that age. At the same time, some affluent baby boomers are planning for earlier retirement in their 50s, while the gradual abolition of mandatory retirement means that others may continue to work well after 65, either full-time or part-time. Recent studies of the pension savings identified that more than 3.5 million Canadians will not have saved sufficient funds to be financially secure in retirement years<sup>viii</sup>. The implications of an aging workforce and financial security of this population need to be considered in terms of transportation, part-time employment and housing affordability.

## **Accessibility Legislation Creates a New Baseline**

The provisions of the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*, passed in 2005, affects all sectors – public, private, and non-profit – and its standards will become legally enforceable. Of particular note is the broad definition of disability, which includes conditions such as arthritis and heart disease. There is, however, no additional funding available to support compliance with the standards. Organizations will simply have more time to implement the more onerous requirements, such as those affecting the built environment.

Standards are being developed in five areas: customer service (the deadline for compliance is 2010), employment, communications, built environment, and transportation. The final four sets of standards are being developed and will be posted for comment on the website of the Ministry of Community and Social Services ([www.mcscs.gov.on.ca](http://www.mcscs.gov.on.ca)).

## **Are We Prepared?**

Planning to accommodate growth in our communities continues to be focussed on building new neighbourhoods, albeit more compact, with a focus on single family housing and a strong dependence on the automobile. These neighbourhoods are best suited to young and middle aged adults who have the greatest range of opportunities for mobility, income and lifestyle choices. What would our communities look like if we ensured the needs of not only seniors but children and youth were the primary determinants of planning and designing our communities? What will it mean when the full impact of our aging communities begins to emerge?

Are we prepared and planning for this known changing composition and lifecycle needs of our communities?

## **Learning from Best in Class Practices**

Many communities of all sizes across Ontario have initiated planning processes to explore and bring forward directions to address age-friendly communities. These include:

- The County of Brant and City of Brantford have recently released A Master Aging Plan that creates a roadmap for the delivery of a comprehensive and coordinated set of community services to older adults that have a wide range of needs.
- The Cities of Mississauga and Kitchener have undertaken focused planning studies to review the implications of an aging population.
- Community resources such as CARP are working hard to rebrand themselves to represent the interests of all Canadians over 45, retired or not, using the term "Zoomers" for "boomers with zip". In conducting research, creating a social networking site and advocating on behalf of Zoomers, CARP and others are informing the discussions amongst older Canadians and offering them resources and a forum in which to engage.

One of the most senior-friendly communities in Ontario is Elliot Lake. This mining community, incorporated in 1955, lost 4,500 jobs in the 1990s when the mines closed. The community responded by attracting retirees, since it had a stock of high-quality housing, plentiful recreational opportunities nearby, good health care services, and an urban form that fostered a safe, cohesive community. Today the community has transitioned to one where 46 per cent of the population is retired. These retirees generate tourism when their friends and families come to visit, and contribute to public revenues. The town has enhanced its recreation facilities and added a seniors' issues office to deal with problems such as security and fraud. Transit routes are designed to stop at the front doors of high-rise complexes and to take seniors to the front doors of the places they need to visit, such as health clinics. The town actively recruits and offers incentives to doctors to provide health care to community residents.

## **Our Position**

Given that the year 2011, when the first of the baby boomers turn 65, has been identified as the turning point for this demographic change - a mere two years away, this Call to Action identifies an imperative to address this dramatic shift in the composition and needs of our communities now. In particular, there are a number of critical implications for which we need to be thinking differently and applying new priorities and solutions in planning for the community composition that we know will exist 20 years from now. Efforts to do so need to involve many players working together and an understanding of the paradigm shift that the demographic changes imply. Planners have a pivotal role to play in bringing together multiple partners and

disciplines and in engaging their communities about the necessary changes in the planning, design and program delivery process.

Building on the thinking and solutions developed through *Healthy Communities, Sustainable Communities*, with which this new initiative is clearly aligned, OPPI encourages that in planning and designing for our communities, the following concepts be considered as having particular relevance, given the challenges identified above.

- 1. Promoting the role of local hubs.** Advancing centres and integrated community has great potential to address some of the challenges faced by an aging population. Municipalities need to consider creating local hubs that bring together in a single location public services from all levels of government – e.g. a place to pay taxes, buy stamps, get government forms, renew licences, sign up for municipal programs and health services with a range of housing, daily shopping needs, transit service and opportunities for community gathering. Many successful neighbourhoods with cores or main street hubs demonstrate the role these play. Further to the traditional neighbourhood centre, there is a need to consider some of the functional details of local hubs such as reviewing signage for visibility to older adults, and partnering with cultural organization to tailor services to older adults within immigrant communities.
- 2. Increasing housing options.** A greater range of housing options needs to be explored and implemented, both in terms of house form and lifecycle housing models. There is a need for more community-based options for people, including their ability to continue to live healthy lives in their own homes – or at least within their own communities – as they grow older. For example, common or shared living models, would allow older home owners to remain in their single family houses while offering potentially affordable and manageable livable housing options to companion seniors. The implementation of flexible and inclusionary zoning may help with keeping seniors in the community.

Designers and developers should be encouraged to revisit Avi Friedman's concept of the "Grow Home" to create a refined model that allows for flexibility to provide for intergenerational family living. Enhanced or additional community supports should be explored that enable seniors who can care for themselves reasonably well, including getting dressed and feeding themselves, but who may need help looking after their homes, assistance with cleaning, laundry, repairs and maintenance. In residential development, the concept of Universal Design or designing for Visitability, whereby improvements aimed at one group within the population end up benefiting everyone, should be encouraged.

- 3. Designing for healthy communities.** OPPI's *Healthy Communities, Sustainable Communities* position paper identifies the core elements of planning for healthy communities with which this Call to Action on Age Friendly communities is clearly aligned. However, the need to prioritize and integrate the provision of community-based health services, active recreational opportunities, retraining and skills transfer and arts and cultural

expression initiatives within our communities the better positioned they will be to meet not only the local needs but leverage the capabilities and offerings of an aging population.

More specifically, leisure and learning opportunities for seniors should be enhanced. Coordination with conservation authorities and municipal parks staff to ensure accessibility and programming are providing a seniors offering but also to explore opportunities related to stewardship are explored. Finally and critically, community-based total health (both mental and physical) models need to be enhanced and further advanced as a means to support not only seniors aging in place but their caregivers as well.

- 4. Promoting integration of uses and adaptive reuse.** Planning for places and facilities that combine programs, uses and functions in an integrated manner is an important concept in creating age-friendly communities. Models which intentionally integrate rather than segregate age specific programs such as seniors services and child care have been implemented with great success in the Netherlands, Scandinavia and Europe.

The opportunity to adaptively reuse underutilized public facilities, such as former schools, for recreation, training and skills, ethno-cultural exchange and creative and arts programs is already being implemented in some communities. Clearly, one of the challenges in doing so is the need to have different public agencies and levels of government working collaboratively together.

- 5. Prioritizing alternatives for mobility.** In studies on the impacts of an aging demographic, the number one issue identified is consistently transportation. Recognizing the significant implications for healthy but also age-friendly communities created by auto-dependent forms of development, the re-emergence of a focus on walkable communities as a guiding community design principle begins to address some of these impacts. The "Complete Streets" movement directs that "streets need to be designed to be safe and convenient for travel by automobile, foot, bicycle and transit regardless of age or ability".

Further, planners need to rethink the provision of a transit service model for seniors<sup>ix</sup>. Not only does this relate to routing and accessibility of facilities but should also involve exploring alternative models that can be implemented in large or small communities. These may include, a concept that combines the low fares of transit with the personalized services of a taxi, known as a "collectivo", or the innovative transit model in place in the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, which is a subsidized fee for service, on demand taxi/transit service available for anyone without a drivers license (aimed mostly at youth and seniors).

- 6. Establishing a meaningful voice: elder councils.** Finding ways for the aging community to have a voice in local decision making processes will become an increasingly important and effective way of ensuring age friendly considerations are part of the planning and development equation. Many municipalities such as Waterloo, Vaughan and London have established Youth

Councils or Cabinets to ensure the voice of youth is heard and considered. Elder Councils could be effective models to not only ensure the voice of seniors is part of decision making processes but could also be a means of leveraging the skills, experience and community history resource that reside within the seniors of our communities.

- 7. Rethinking the way municipalities function and operate.** Baby boomers will not age in quite the same way as their parents and grandparents. As a group, they have higher education levels, their health is generally better, and most are financially better off, and there are more of them. Thus, when seniors make up a larger proportion of the population, community planning will have to change.

Two studies on the effects of older adults in Ontario communities – one in Kitchener, the other in Mississauga - found that changes will be needed in *all* municipal functions: emergency services, parks and recreation, social and community services, libraries, public transit, finance, engineering, and so on. These studies found that there was widespread support for ability-to-pay models, where those who can pay for special services do so, while those who cannot, are subsidized. Interestingly, older adults represent a growing group of Internet users, although their level of use is below that of young people. They want information and they appreciate websites that direct them to services of interest to their age group, as well as websites that are easy to read and straightforward to use.

Generally, there is a need to be more familiar with the demographics and projections for our individual communities and to ensure municipal councillors and the public are aware of the implications of those projections. Demographic pyramids (rather than straight-line forecasts and aggregated population numbers) should be taken more into account in preparing official plans.

- 8. Building on successful models.** Many good examples of age-friendly initiatives exist today in our communities. Some of these are community-based projects or programs that were developed to address the needs of seniors. For example, the Seniors Person Resources in North Toronto (SPRINT) initiative, a community-based seniors resource centre, evolved and broadened its mandate from the initial organization called Housing in North Toronto (HINT) which was originally founded to address the need to find housing solutions for a growing number of resident seniors in this Toronto neighbourhood. Others may be municipal or agency innovations or creative partnerships. Compiling a compendium of best-in-class practices will allow for sharing and learning from these successes. Such a compendium should seek to include precedents from large and small, urban and rural, and northern and southern Ontario communities, as the challenges and experiences facing Ontario's diverse communities will vary.

## The Way Forward

To get started on addressing the significant challenges ahead, this Call to Action recommends that all communities kick-start an Age-Friendly Community Plan process which could involve the following:

- preparing an age-friendly community audit of municipal plans, operations and services that review community elements such as housing, community services and health care, streetscape design, mobility options, and leisure and learning opportunities;
- establishing baseline data to understand the place specific community composition;
- identifying priority issues and responses related to the changing demographics and utilization of these priorities to establish a place to get started or action plan;
- creating monitoring mechanisms on a five-year increment basis (in sync with Census Canada data releases) to review and manage demographic change and impacts; and
- creating a toolkit and success story manual for community partners and agencies to utilize to bring about change in their operations;
- exploring new partnerships or better integration of services between agencies and non-governmental organizations to provide for an age-friendly community.

## Summary

In planning to accommodate age-friendly communities and in particular, an aging population, health care, housing, auto-dependent forms of development and transportation are emerging as key issues. But there are many more issues which extend beyond the boundaries of conventional planning and design for communities. Further, the changing demographic requires using a new fundamentally different lens that recognizes this paradigm shift when planning for our communities of the future. Yet, there appears to be consensus that most of Ontario's communities are not ready for the so-called "grey tsunami".

Accessibility legislation will force some changes, but planning needs to start now. The key first step is through an age-friendly planning process is to define what the challenge will mean for each community and to get started with top priority issues for that community. Not all communities will be equally affected – many smaller centres and communities in northern Ontario are aging more rapidly than bigger cities in Ontario. Moreover, not all seniors have identical needs, nor are their needs identical to those of previous generations.

The list of potential responses to challenges of an aging population is long, ranging from changes in legislation to allow for property tax credits for low-income seniors to

road narrowing, or the addition of pedestrian islands, to make walking more comfortable. But the benefits are considerable, since many of the changes will also make life easier for children, parents, disabled persons and others.

Since there is a lag between the time when needs are identified and the time services are delivered, planners need to act quickly. At the same time, planners need to do what they can to reduce this time lag. Planning for age-friendly communities needs to be sufficiently proactive and involve many stakeholders, agencies and disciplines that all have a critical role to play in creating healthy, livable communities for all ages.

**For further information, please contact:**

Loretta Ryan, MCIP, RPP, CAE  
Manager, Policy and Communications

[policy@ontarioplanners.on.ca](mailto:policy@ontarioplanners.on.ca)

---

<sup>i</sup> Statistics Canada 2006

<sup>ii</sup> Leinberger, Chris. Brookings Institute, *The Option of Urbanism*, 2007

<sup>iii</sup> Foot, David, reference speech at OPPI symposium

<sup>iv</sup> Martin Prosperity Institute. *Geography of Immigration in Canada*, March 2009, p 5.

<sup>v</sup> Desai, Kappu. *Ethnic Communities and the Challenge of Aging*, *Polphony* Vol 12, 1990, pp87-92.

<sup>vi</sup> Region of Waterloo Growth Management Strategy

<sup>vii</sup> Laura Skufca. *Is the Cost of Gas Leading Americans to Use Alternative Transportation?*, AARP Knowledge Management, August 2008.

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.carp.ca/advocacy/adv-article-display.cfm?documentID=3851>

<sup>ix</sup> Foot, David. Presentation at OPPI symposium