

Social ‘Twilight’ Zones

Communities Explore Elder-friendly Strategies

By **Symone C. Skrzycki**

It's dusk on the banks of the Ohio River in Southeast Indiana as a foursome steps onto Grand Victoria riverboat in Rising Sun for an evening of gaming and camaraderie. Members of the group pull some money from their pockets and purses as the unmistakable sound of the slot machines welcomes them aboard.

The tourist attraction is big business in this small town (population: approximately 2,500). But, like many other communities, its downtown is underutilized. A potential revitalization project designed to draw/retain Baby Boomers – and businesses – would broaden the allure and boost the local economy.

Plans currently under consideration in Rising Sun grew out of a Kendallville pilot study conducted by Fort Wayne-based architectural firm Morrison Kattman Menze, Inc. (MKM).

“The work we do is based around a concept we call an “Elder-Centric Village” (ECV) support network – a redevelopment model that utilizes the rapidly growing senior population as a catalyst for re-energizing the socio-economic activity within existing downtowns in an effort to create vibrant intergenerational communities,” explains MKM senior associate Zach Benedict.

“They (Rising Sun) want to be kind of the national prototype for how this is done.”

Senior-focused initiatives are already underway in communities like Linton, with its 5,000-plus residents in Greene County in the southwestern part of the state. Among priorities are improving access to health and wellness offerings, generating employment opportunities and enhancing quality of life.

“It's becoming a national phenomenon,” declares Phil Stafford, director of the Center on Aging and Community at the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community at Indiana University in Bloomington. “There are cities and towns all over the country that are beginning to reflect more seriously on this issue.”

He points out that cultivating elder-friendly communities presents a variety of significant economic development prospects.

“Older people are more likely to purchase health care services, so it provides jobs across a range of salary levels as the older population increases,” Stafford observes. “One of the clear benefits to having new elders move into an area is that particularly when it's a more affluent population, they bring their financial portfolios with them. And perhaps just as important – they bring social capital, human capital in the community.”

It takes a village

In fall 2009, MKM examined 31 Hoosier cities with populations spanning 10,000 to 20,000 to determine the feasibility of applying the ECV model. Kendallville – the smallest – was chosen for a case study. Under this concept, seniors could select from a “menu of services” featuring a voucher program, co-working and transportation; all are part of the potential Rising Sun plan. At the time of this interview, Kendallville was not aggressively pursuing implementation.

“Some of the more unique things we'll try to do (in Rising Sun) is start looking at what kind of social network synergies we can create,” Benedict comments. “One of my favorite ideas is a voucher program they're excited about trying to implement. The idea was that the downtown could have a service package it could offer that would include vouchers to locally owned services. You could get medical care, coffee at the local art center, movie tickets (for example) all prorated (as part of) a monthly package.

“It encourages people to interact with the intergenerational community.”

Integrating senior housing is another important component.

“Our downtown only consists of about two blocks – three at the most – so the (economic) impact we could have with 30 or 40 housing units would (be) considerable,” asserts Ed Sullivan, executive director of the Rising Sun Regional Foundation, which is leading planning efforts.

Sullivan anticipates that the city will make a decision by mid-summer whether to pursue the revitalization plan.



Workforce Wise: Upcoming

This special series of stories will continue throughout the first five *BizVoice*® issues of 2011. Below is the general topic for the final edition:

- **September-October:**
what's next; employer, employee perspectives

Walking the walk

Strategically locating amenities and services within close proximity to one another provides not only economic advantages, but also health benefits.

“There is a lot of research to support (the notions that) frequency of interaction with other people and walking daily reduce the chances of developing Alzheimer’s. The idea of being engaged is the most important part of this entire conversation,” Benedict emphasizes. “It will improve not only your own individual health, but also will allow you to play a critical role in the health of the community.”

Linton was among five Hoosier communities to receive a set of state grants in early 2008 to establish a Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC), an area containing a high concentration of older adults. Forty percent of people living in each NORC were at least age 60.

“Mobility was the banner issue,” shares healthy aging director Sheri Phillips at Generations, an area agency on aging affiliated with Vincennes University. “The three ways we wanted to do that was through physical wellness, transportation services and home modification in and around the home (to heighten accessibility and help prevent injuries).”

Planning was modeled after the national AdvantAge Initiative, which emphasizes four essential elements of an elder-friendly community: addressing basic needs, maximizing independence for the frail and disabled, promoting social and



Sheri Phillips of Generations explains the approach to home modifications in Linton: “It’s almost a common sense thing, but (we asked), ‘What literal steps does it take for a person to get from point A to point B and is it safe for them?’ ”

civic engagement, and optimizing physical and mental health and well-being.

Joann Neff, a 70-year-old member of the planning committee who has lived in Linton for nearly a decade, is one of 16 individuals who received a home modification through the NORC grant.

“I had some health issues and they had a home health person (from Greene County Home Health Care) come in to evaluate what I needed,” she recalls.

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Modifications included installation of bathtub grab bars, a garage ramp and an ADA (American with Disabilities Act) stool.

No American 'idle'

Benedict agrees with people who say Rising Sun is a great place to retire, but he does acknowledge its obstacles.

"They're facing all of the challenges other small communities are facing," he reflects. "They have a gorgeous downtown, but there are no bodies on the street. Businesses are struggling. Some of their key, more iconic businesses are considering whether they should stay or if they have a future in Rising Sun."

One strategy to keep those businesses in town – and recruit others – is to take advantage of retirees' expertise.

"It's a falsity to think that 65 and older are all retirees that sit around and don't work all day," Benedict contends. "One, the economy won't allow that to happen. (Second,) I don't think Baby Boomers will be content sitting in rocking chairs."

"We've started to put co-working suites (which afford companies shared space and office services) as a way to operate as a pseudo incubator for start-up companies and emerging professionals. They might be able to get free knowledge from retired workers," he remarks, citing as an example a retired CFO sharing financial knowledge with an entrepreneur.

Focus on fitness

Through NORC funding, Linton residents received vouchers to participate in fitness classes centered on improving balance, flexibility and strength.

Last summer, Linton piloted its own version of the Healthy Moves for Aging Well program through a partnership with home health agencies serving Greene County. It involved at-home activities covering several types of strength-training exercises.

"(It) was designed for frail, home-bound older adults to help reduce their health risk," Phillips reveals.

Benedict says that downtown Rising Sun is too small to attract a large organization such as a YMCA, but notes that seniors can utilize an existing gym.

Expanding access

Rising Sun and Linton share a major challenge: the absence of local medical care.

Residents of both communities must drive to nearby cities for doctors' appointments. In addition to recruiting health care providers, increasing transportation offerings could alleviate that burden. Linton temporarily addressed this barrier by using NORC funding to provide public transportation vouchers.

"We do need the public transportation here in town," Neff relates. "I don't think we need it 24/7, but there are people who have doctors' appointments in Terre Haute (as well as Bloomington and Indianapolis) – and I'm one of them. That's almost an hour's drive."



Rising Sun Mayor Bill Marksberry (third from left) and Ed Sullivan (far right), executive director of the Rising Sun Regional Foundation, are among those celebrating the grand opening of DeVille's Pharmacy (photo by Register Publications).

Benedict stresses that the existing options simply aren't enough.

"Rising Sun has a trolley managed and operated by the casino, but if we can (have service that is centered) around the redevelopment initiative, we would have in reality public transit, allowing us to offer a much broader choice of where these residents can and can't go," he stresses.

Sullivan refers to the recent relocation of DeVille's Rising Sun Pharmacy to downtown as a "vital piece" (of the community plan) and proclaims that attracting that company will help Rising Sun to "better serve the senior population."

"We were without a pharmacy for a year or two because the privately owned one for 30 to 40 years or more closed and was purchased by CVS," he recalls. "The closest pharmacy was nine to 10 miles away. It became a real hardship not only for current residents, but also if we would pursue the retirement concept."

Phillips asserts, "The most important thing is maintaining fluid partnerships with all of the key individuals who make decisions in a community so all voices are consistently heard."

Stafford sums it up: "It comes down to quality of life ... in terms of relocation and keeping people in a community. Being able to walk conveniently to places for basic retail needs as well as social and cultural opportunities (or) if not within walking distance, the quality of the streets and the traffic make a big difference."

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Phil Stafford, Center on Aging and Community at the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community at Indiana University in Bloomington, at <http://agingindiana.org>

Zach Benedict, Morrison Kattman Menze, at www.mkmdesign.com

Sheri Phillips, Generations, at www.generationsnetwork.org

Ed Sullivan, Rising Sun Regional Foundation, at esullivan43@comcast.net