

Universal Design for an Aging Population

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As published in the Banner Post, October 5, 2011 and the Mile Zero News, October 19, 2011

It is clear that many municipalities in the Peace Country are experiencing an aging population, which is a trend that needs to be planned for. As people age, they often become visually and hearing impaired, experience memory loss, face mobility issues, lose the ability to drive, and become more susceptible to long term injuries.

Traditionally, the elderly have been placed in housing facilities which often provide meals, emergency response systems, housekeeping, and a variety of on-site social and recreational activities. Despite all these amenities, such facilities still separate seniors from the communities that they had previously been members of, so that they may be protected from the perceived dangers of the outside world.

Seniors would prefer not to be secluded from their communities, but integrated which may be accomplished through universal design. Universal design ensures that built environments includes public spaces and buildings that are accessible to people of different abilities.

Unlike alternatives that segregate people of different abilities, such as ramps that are adjacent to a staircases, through universal design spaces are created to be unrestricted in regard to their users and to be accessible to everyone in the initial phases of design. Through integration, individuals don't feel stigmatized by receiving special accommodations because of their level of ability. Some examples of universal design that are especially beneficial to seniors include curb cuts, memorable street networks that are easy to navigate, no-step entry, one-storey living, extra floor space, and short travel times through the strategic placement of buildings.

Perhaps, the most convincing argument for universal design is that often these foresights benefit people of all ages and ability levels. For example, curb cuts are useful to anyone that wishes to use a stroller, shopping cart or skateboard. Furthermore, memorable streets can improve the image of a municipality for all its users.

How does this connect to planning? The principles of universal design are just starting to be applied in planning in the Peace Country. Therefore, it is important to continue to develop knowledge of what excludes certain groups of the population, which begins by ensuring that people of different abilities and ages are meaningfully involved in planning processes.