

Casper, Wyoming Senior Study

Better Meeting the Needs of Tomorrows Seniors

Like many communities across the nation, the City of Casper is thinking about the impending social, economic, and political changes that are likely as the baby boomer generation approaches retirement. More than 13 percent of the city's population is currently over aged 65 and 22 percent is aged 45-64. In 2007, leaders in Casper initiated a research project to answer the following question, "What will Casper boomers need and want in terms of public and private services in the upcoming decades?"

The answers to this question will help this central Wyoming city of 50,000 address the future needs of its residents. In recognition of its foresight and strategic planning efforts, the city of Casper was awarded the Environmental Protection Agency's 2008 Commitment Award for Excellence in Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging.

Linda Witko, Casper's Assistant City Manager, explains that the seeds for the research project were planted when the Casper Senior Center made a request for funds to expand its facility and increase services. The request stemmed for a 25 percent increase in the number of people the center was serving between 2000 and 2005.

Recognizing requests for resources to meet the needs of a diverse and expanding older adult population would continue, the city wanted better insight into the needs and wants of this demographic group. "We started asking things like, 'Will the boomer generation want the same type of services we currently provide through the senior center?' 'Will they want to receive services in the same way today's seniors do or will we need to create new systems such as satellite offices in neighborhoods?' " said Witko.

"As we started to talk to people, we learned the University of Wyoming's Department of Social Services was looking at similar issues from university's standpoint. They were asking questions about what the university will need to do to develop tomorrow's nurses and social workers who will serve the growing number of seniors. What started as a focused research project to plan for our senior center services became a comprehensive community process that looked at the statewide perspective in addition to issues specific to Casper,"

At the start of the project the city and senior center developed a proposal that was funded by a state grant, with matching funds from the city. As the project expanded additional funding came from other communities in the region, local foundations, media, medical centers, and regional businesses.

What were some of the striking outcomes of the research? "A lot of boomers are in denial about the fact that they are aging," comments Witko. "When you talk to some people, it seems like they don't believe they are going to get old. People are active and healthy today, and they have not considered the possibility that they may not be healthy and independent five or ten years from now."

Future health care services are a significant concern the city and its residents need to address. Witko explained that 30 percent of mid-life adults in Casper have a serious chronic illness such as heart disease, diabetes, or cancer. "People are not always looking at how chronic illnesses might impact them as they get older. Will we have a very sick elderly population who will need significant health care services or will our population get good medical care now so their conditions remain under control? How will health insurance and Medicare be impacted? Will there be enough health professionals available?"

Housing for Casper's future seniors is another issue the community is weighing. Recognizing that most people want to age in place, the city and area developers are looking at senior-friendly homes in mixed-use neighborhoods with easy access to services such as shopping, health care, libraries, and restaurants. Sidewalks, street lighting, cross walks, and street signs are being evaluated with an eye to the future population. Even issues such as seating in public buildings, like auditoriums, are being looked at with sensitivity to the needs of older adults.

"A lot of what we are doing falls in line with smart growth and new urbanism" says Witko. "We need to grow our community in a way that allows us to take care of each other and maintain a sense of neighborhoods." She notes that a major threat to the health of seniors is isolation. Seniors are more likely to get sick and depressed when they are isolated from the community. "Anything we can do as a community to help seniors stay connected will help. These include enabling them to have a variety of different opportunities, housing options, and activities. Not everyone wants the same thing."

In addition to housing and health, the research revealed that Casper's aging population is a tremendous resource for area businesses. As people retire from traditional careers, many want new challenges. And they want control over their time. Witko points out that employers need to look at how they can engage older workers, who may no longer want to work full time, but who still want to stay connected, and who have invaluable experience and talent to contribute.

One of the exciting things about the boomer research project is it got people in Casper engaged in addressing the needs of an aging population. "Sometimes we struggled to get people together to meet on the topic of our aging community," said Witko. "But once we got started people became engaged. Aging is not an abstract demographic issue. It is personal."

For more information, please contact:

[Linda L. Witko](#)

lwitko@cityofcasperwy.com

Assistant City Manager

City of Casper

(307) 235-8296

About the Award

2008 Commitment Award for Excellence in Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging

The award honors the communities that are planning for, and beginning to use, smart growth and active aging. Active aging strives to promote strategies that engage older adults through structured and unstructured opportunities for physical activity. Active aging is supported by safe, walkable environments. Smart growth strives to minimize the impact of the built environment on both human health and the natural environment by integrating environmental considerations into development patterns. Using smart growth, communities create attractive, walkable neighborhoods that give people of all ages, income levels, and physical abilities a range of safe, affordable and convenient choices in where to live and how to get around.

For additional information, please visit the EPA's Aging Initiative Web site at <http://www.epa.gov/aging/bhc/awards/index.htm>.