



## A WHITE PAPER REPORT

### **Boomers: Transforming Park and Recreation Services**

America is graying. Newspapers, television, magazines, as well as government and scholarly reports tell us that we crossed the threshold of a major shift in demographics when the first Boomers turned 60. In the next thirty years our nation's senior population will double as the Boomers age.

What will the impacts of the aging population be to on community park and recreation systems? How do we prepare for these impacts, and what do we need to prepare for? What planning initiatives are needed now to prepare to meet the anticipated park and recreation service needs 10, 20 and 30 years from now? How will existing resources be redistributed, and where will new resources be found, to address the needs of the aging Boomers?

The purpose of this report is to discuss the challenges for community park and recreation service agencies as they redesigning their facilities, programs and services to address the needs of the Boomers. This paper describes some of the challenges and opportunities, identifies some of their impacts, and initiates a dialogue on how best to find solutions. It is also a call to action for park and recreation agencies to initiate strategic planning for serving the Boomers.

#### Need for Report

There is urgency to this discussion. Over the next several decades the Boomers will be the largest constituent group to be served by park and recreation agencies. It is imperative that we begin planning for the lifestyle and community service needs of this group now, before they overwhelm the resources of network of the public, non-profit, and private service providers.

#### The Demographics:

The 76 million Boomers born between 1946 and 1964 represent the largest birth cohort ever in the United States. Every 7 seconds a Boomer turns 60, 10,000 Boomer turn 60 every day, 365 days per year, every year through 2024. By 2030 one of every five Americans will be a Boomer.

The cultural differences between the generation born in the period 1911 to 1945 and the Baby Boomers, those born after 1945, are striking. These differences help to identify how the interests, needs, and expectations for senior services will change as the Boomers age.

Many seniors who are currently over the age of 60 served in World War II, they witnessed the Great Depression, through their labors they created the booming economy of the 1950's, and they contributed to the rise of the middle class. Their experiences taught them the value of hard work, self-sacrifice, and discipline. Social Security has given this generation economic security, and they were the first to experience mass retirement. This generation is conservative, risk-averse, and conformist.

The Boomer generation has experienced a period of unprecedented prosperity and unlimited horizons. They challenge authority and traditional values. They prize their individuality. They are more affluent than the prior generation and they will have more money to spend. Because of the size of their age cohort, they will hold significant political clout as they age. They will live longer and as they age they will be healthier and more active, enjoy increased mobility, and will live more independently than past generations. The lifestyle and community service needs and expectations of Boomers will be diverse, and they will demand choices.

These factors present significant rationale for rethinking park and recreation services to determine how community park and recreation agencies will contribute to meeting the needs of active adult Boomers as they age.

## Parks

Boomers indicate that they currently use parks and indicate that they will need more parks in the future. In a 2006 study of future community services needs in Palo Alto CA, Boomers were asked to describe their community lifestyle needs of today, and to anticipate their needs into the near-term future.

Boomers indicated that they are presently engaged in, and will continue to find a priority in leisure activities, park, and recreation facilities. Close proximity to home, convenient pedestrian and vehicular accessibility, well-designed and well-maintained paths, attractive scenery, safety, good lighting, restrooms, and access to drinking water are factors that attract active adults to use parks for activities.

Parks contribute to healthy active lifestyles. Older adults living near safe walking/biking paths, parks, or recreation centers are more likely to meet or exceed recommended daily levels of physical activity. Those who had the best access to a variety of natural and built facilities are nearly twice as likely to get the recommended 30-minutes of physical activity most days of the week as compared with seniors who do not have access or have poor access to parks or facilities. Stress relief is another common benefit that active adults attribute to park visits.

Other park amenities that meet the needs of Boomers include relaxation areas for lunch and events, off-leash dog areas, disc golf courses, geocaching sites, golf courses, and sports fields.

### Senior Centers

Senior centers have been the predominant providers of community-based senior adult recreation activities over the past four decades. Many of the estimated 15,000 senior centers across the country have been operating since the mid-1960 when, under the Older Americans Act of 1965, the centers were subsidized on the basis of the number of hot mid-day meals that were served. The senior centers were a means of achieving improved nutrition and socialization among seniors in urban areas.

While nutrition and companionship remain worthy goals, the 40-year old senior center model falls short of serving the needs of today's Boomers, and as a result, the trend in communities across the country is declining attendance at senior centers. In 2007 Pennsylvania Governor Rendell designated \$4 million in grants to revitalize 153 senior community centers in the state. The Governor's office recognized that while many forward-thinking senior community centers are working to attract members of the 'Baby Boomer' generation, he also acknowledged that some of Boomers may mistakenly think senior centers have little to offer them. Therefore, centers have received grants to study how to attract, and better serve, the Boomers. Only a portion of the funding has supported repairs, renovations and new equipment at the centers.

An ever increasing number of senior recreation facilities and programs encourage participation by pre-seniors over the age of 55 or even 50; however, few programs have been successful in attracting these pre-senior adults. The primary objections to participation that are expressed by Boomers include the stigma of senior centers as being stodgy places for old people. Boomers equate senior centers with nursing homes, institutional meals, and old, outdated

activities that do not engage their interests. Boomers don't perceive of themselves as being old or as being "seniors".

William Novelli, Executive Director of AARP, has described Boomers' expectations this way: *"Basically, boomers like to have fun...They are looking for the new experience. They want to create their own experiences, because in this "been there, done that" world of today, they are often bored, and searching for novelty."*

Successful communities are reconfiguring their recreation center facilities and redefining their programs and services to better meet the needs of the Boomers. These new-era centers create an environment to provide for security, convenience, efficiency, comfort, and a sense of welcome. They offer a "with it" image and they have nothing in the facility name, décor or program of activities that matches the stereotype of a "senior center". The new facilities include libraries, media rooms, computers, and fitness rooms.

Mather Lifeways, a non-profit organization that provides a continuum of community living and service options for seniors, attracts adults over age 50 to participate in a broad scope of recreational, educational, and wellness programming at three Chicago-area neighborhood recreation centers that include on-site coffee shops/cyber cafés.

Programming for Boomers is also challenging conventional thinking about senior adult recreation. While programming that is developed based on assessments of the community needs and interests are the most relevant and successful, a number of programming trends are evident in communities across the country. Boomers want to spend their time with educational programs, cultural and arts activities, enjoying the outdoors, and volunteering.

Wellness is perceived to be very important to Boomers. The findings of a 2006 survey of more than 5,000 middle-aged and senior adults indicated that this age group is interested in active recreation. Ninety-three percent of active adults over the age of 50 indicated that exercise is a primary way to manage healthy aging. They are interested in active recreation that promotes healthy lifestyles. They want fitness activities, nutrition education, and information about preventative health care.

Working out to stay in shape is a high priority for those who are over age 50. Health and fitness activities including strength training and cardio workouts, swimming, and walking were noted as especially important. Approximately 77% of the survey respondents reported that they workout at least three days per week. Fewer than 6% indicated working out zero days per week. These

survey results are reinforced by a reported 3-year 114% increase in health club memberships by those over age 55 (International Health, Racquetball and Sports Club Association).

Balance training programs such as Pilates, Tai Chi, and yoga are on the rise with more than 51% of respondents indicating that these activities were extremely important.

Adventurous pursuits such as hiking, climbing, white water rafting, river rafting, kayaking, hang gliding, skydiving, and hot air ballooning are of interest for among active adults.

Adults over age 50 are technology savvy. They are frequent users of the internet. Eighty-two percent of them indicate that they use the web extensively and sixty-four percent have been on line for more than six years. An estimated seven million adults over age 50, who have no children in the home, own video game systems. Nearly one-third of the active bloggers are middle-aged adults.

### Operational Changes

To better serve the new population of active adult Boomers, park and recreation agencies are changing their service paradigm. The challenge is to create a new image for adult facilities and services by rethinking all aspects of operations beginning with creating new and innovative names for their facilities and programs.

Communities are planning recreation facilities and parks with the more inclusive concept known as “universal design” which increases usability for a broader population. Universal design considers how the built environment and products can be used to the greatest extent possible by everyone, regardless of age or ability. The intent of the universal design in recreation centers and parks is to plan spaces that are more usable by as many people as possible at little or no extra cost. Universal design benefits people of all ages and abilities, and it is an approach to designing communities that are aging-friendly.

Senior centers have traditionally operated from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm Monday thru Friday. The new adult centers are extending their hours to include early morning, evening, and weekend hours to accommodate the schedules of those participants who are working or volunteering.

Adult programming and services are increasingly fee-based and revenue focused in order to remain financially viable. Boomers are typically in their peak earning years and have adequate discretionary funds to pay for services.

Food service offers the casualness of a coffee shop environment. The food selections are flexible including light, healthy foods such including fresh vegetable and fruits.

Park and recreation agencies have not traditionally engaged in active marketing or advertising for their senior centers and programming. Rather, they have relied on word-of-mouth as their primary means of communication with seniors. New-age adult centers are taking a more aggressive approach with marketing campaigns that inform and attract the Boomers to participate in adult programs and use the new adult facilities. Boomer will buy products and services that are marketed to them. Because Boomers don't think of themselves as "old" or as being "seniors" and they ignore any marketing message targeting "older adults" or "seniors". The most effective marketing messages are tailored to reach the Boomers.

Addressing the challenges of an aging population will require leadership and vision. Training and professional development will be needed for the staff and citizen boards who manage these increasingly complex operations. This includes leadership development training in administrative skills, supervisory skills, financial management, marketing, as well as strong programming skills.

In the current era of shrinking resources, park and recreation service agencies are developing a broad network of partnership with other agencies in the community. These partnerships strengthen the economic and social viability of active adult services. Potential partners include local and regional businesses, other senior service providers, educational institutions, the faith-based community, civic organizations, and health care providers.

### Comprehensive Planning

Community park and recreation agencies across the country are anticipating the new demands for service from their constituents who are age 50-plus. In preparation, agencies are developing comprehensive plans to meet the challenges of transforming their programming, facilities, and marketing strategies to serve the rapidly-growing Boomer market segment. Those park and recreation agencies that review and update their mission and goal statements, engage in strategic planning, and commit to ongoing training and development for professional staff and citizen boards will be positioned to provide the facilities, programming and services that address the needs of Boomers in the coming decades.

Comprehensive planning is focused on achievable and meaningful near and long-term strategies to prepare for the impacts of the population shift, as well as discover ways to maximize on the opportunities that come with Boomers.

Conclusions:

Park and recreation agencies must be innovative in their future programming and services for active adults age 50-plus. By investing strategically, and carefully planning ahead, we can ensure that park and recreation services will continue to be healthy and vibrant contributors to our communities.

Addressing the challenges of an aging population will require leadership and vision. The purpose of this brief analysis is to prompt the leaders in communities across the county to develop strategic plans for their and park and recreation services to assure that park and recreation services will continue to contribute to "Age Well".

## Resources

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AARP, "Reimagining America, How America Can Grow Older and Prosper", 2005  
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[www.avenidas.org/BABoomerImpactStudy.pdf](http://www.avenidas.org/BABoomerImpactStudy.pdf)