

Cities for seniors

UVic research helps Saanich lead the way to an age-friendly future

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Gallagher

by Jessica Gillies

The world's population is aging, and our cities aren't keeping up. Inadequate signage, inaccessible transportation and unaffordable housing are among the challenges seniors face as they try to stay active in their communities.

But if you live in Saanich help is on the way. The municipality took part in the World Health Organization's (WHO) Global Age-Friendly Cities Project, in which 33 cities across the world, including four in Canada, looked at the barriers seniors face and how they can be removed.

The research was led by Dr. Elaine Gallagher, director of the University of Victoria's Centre on Aging, which partnered with Saanich and the BC Ministry of Health on the project.

"In the next 20 years, we can expect to see double the number of older people in most of the developed world," says Gallagher. "Yet cities aren't designed with seniors in mind."

Slippery stairs without handrails, pedestrian routes without washrooms and benches, small font sizes in print media, and background noise in buildings—these are just a few of the barriers that seniors

face on a daily basis in their communities.

Gallagher's team interviewed seniors, family caregivers, service providers, merchants, volunteers and paid care providers in the health-care system. The results, combined with other findings from around the world, have created a WHO guide that cities can use to make themselves more age-friendly.

In Saanich, changes are already underway. Projects include making public transit more accessible, widening sidewalks to accommodate scooters, and creating intergenerational programs such as partnerships between seniors' associations and school districts.

New design guidelines that consider accessibility will be adopted for major buildings, and senior-friendly changes, such as audio and large-text options, will be made on the municipality's website. Facilities such as recreation centres and the municipal hall will hold "open house" days so that seniors can familiarize themselves with the services offered.

"The mandate of the WHO project wasn't to implement changes, but many of the participating communities took advantage of the information they'd gathered to carry on and do that," says Gallagher. "Saanich got very involved right from the start and made a commitment to make some concrete changes."

The WHO project inspired two other initiatives. The first, funded by the federal government, examined challenges faced by seniors in rural and remote communities across the country. The findings, which complement the earlier research on cities, will help rural and remote communities across the world become more senior-friendly.

The second initiative is a BC-wide push to have as many communities in the province as possible assess their age-friendliness and implement changes in time for the 2010 Olympics.

"In the past, the Olympics have always been marketed as a youthful event. We say that people who have mobility issues, are frail because of old age or have vision or hearing problems should be able to participate fully in life as well," says Gallagher, who is a consultant with the BC Age-Friendly Communities Implementation Team.

"People have much more capacity in their later years than we ever realized—for wisdom, for fitness, for socialization, for contributing to civic life," she says. "The way to encourage that is to create a society where people are not banned from that participation because of transportation issues, lack of proper housing, inadequate walkways or anything else."

EDGEwise

In the 2006 census, six per cent of BC's population was 75 or older. Almost 45 per cent of Saanich residents were more than 45 years-old.

Which business in the capital region provides the best service to seniors? It's the Thrifty Foods store in Sidney, which in January won the Centre on Aging's inaugural Senior-Friendly Business Award. The award cites the store's wider aisles, well-labelled and accessible washroom, benches, good lighting and patient, personable staff.

Elaine Gallagher has won the 2008 Career Achievement Award from the Confederation of University Faculty Associations of BC for her research on fall prevention in seniors.

The Saanich Report on the Global Age-Friendly Cities Project is available at www.saanich.ca/resident/community/services/senior.html.

UVic researchers were awarded more than \$71 million in external research grants and contracts in 2006/07, doubling the research support of the previous five-year period.

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