

Portland tries to make buildings more age friendly

by Reed Jackson

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With the recent release of the expansive Portland Plan, the city established a daunting goal: creating equity for all groups.

One of the groups mentioned was the elderly population, which is expected to more than double in the Portland-metro area in the next 25 years, according to a 2006 study performed by Portland State University. The Portland Plan lists 10 actions that would help make the city more age friendly; some include creating more accessible housing, aligning housing and transportation investments and educating city staffers about age issues.

Although no specific programs or initiatives are in place yet, the plan could have a big effect on future development, according to **Alan DeLaTorre**, project coordinator for PSU's Institute on Aging. The institute is working with the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability to create an "action plan" to implement actions outlined in the Portland Plan. No regulations will be imposed, but stipulations and incentives are being considered for the action plan, which will be released later this year.

"We're very excited because this is the first time the city has articulated a considerable effort to address these issues," DeLaTorre said. "We are looking to create a set of development guidelines that inform people on how to develop in a more age-friendly and universal way."

Portland was one of the first U.S. cities to be named an age-friendly city by the World Health Organization. However, the plan reveals that many more improvements can be made.

Many of the actions mentioned in the plan relate to housing development. A lot of the housing being built in Portland is "Peter Pan housing," according to DeLaTorre, because it doesn't provide amenities for residents as they age, such as wide hallways for wheelchair access, entry ramps and first-floor bathrooms.

One incentive being considered is a system development charge waiver for home additions with accessibility features. Also, more exemptions could be provided for accessible housing if the city's Limited Tax Exemption program were improved.

"It's these types of strategies that might be connected to age-friendly development," DeLaTorre said. "Currently, the Portland Housing Bureau has a set of strategic priorities, and aging is not among those; we want to change that."

An initiative being considered is reduction of barriers faced by retirement communities and adult care homes. Many aging individuals lack options as they begin to need assistance for basic needs and health care, according to a study being reviewed by PSU graduate students and BPS officials. The initiative would alter the city's zoning code to encourage more development of adult care homes and exploration of opportunities to incorporate adult home care models into public housing developments.

Initiatives also are being considered for where housing developments are built. Many older people in the city are limited to where they can walk for food, medicine and transportation, DeLaTorre said. This problem could be changed by adding accessibility and affordability requirements to the city's transit-oriented development property tax abatement.

Creating more age-friendly housing would not only benefit elderly people, but also developers, said Margaret Neal, director of the Institute on Aging.

““Recognizing that older adults are a very large consumer group, meeting those needs I think is going to be an incentive toward development,”” she said. ““They are going to be purchasing the (housing) that is most optimal for them.””

Other initiatives being proposed for the action plan relate to the development and maintenance of pedestrian infrastructure, such as sidewalks and streetlights; the creation of more green spaces; and the inclusion of more accessible features in retail and commercial buildings. One idea being considered is to create incentives for commercial developers to exceed American with Disabilities Act standards and use universal design strategies.

Part of the process in developing the action plan is determining which issues are affecting the elderly the most and how they can best be addressed, DeLaTorre said. But many of these proposals could lay the groundwork for future policies.

In order for the actions laid out in the plan to be realized, public-private partnerships must be formed, Neal said. That will take time, but the city has already made tremendous progress, she said.

““As a country, we have always focused on the importance of independent and rugged individualism, but we are age denying; we don’t really want to think about the later years,”” she said. ““One of my goals is to help people understand that if we design for people with disabilities and people as they grow older, it will benefit everyone.””