

The Times

Centers of vibrant activity

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Hamilton's senior center is "state of the art," according to the township's supervisor of senior services, Kathleen Fitzgerald. Purchased eight years ago with \$1.45 million in grant money and subsequently renovated, it has an indoor swimming pool, a commercial kitchen, a large dining room, pool tables, computers, a Wii game system and an indoor bocce court.

West Windsor just spent about \$1.4 million to more than double the size of its center to 5,000 square feet, adding classrooms, a computer room, a game room, a patio, solar panels and other environmentally friendly features.

In Hopewell Valley, the Senior Advisory Board has big ambitions to build a new, \$3 million center in Pennington and move out of their current, one-room facility, a former Boy Scouts building.

Board member Larry Mansier said getting the taxpayers of Hopewell Township and Pennington and Hopewell boroughs to contribute to the project will be "a heavy lift," but he points out that a new center would benefit the roughly 20 percent of the area's population that is 55 and older.

"We looked around and said, well, 20 percent of the population goes to the schools. They get about two-thirds of the money," Mansier said. "That got people invigorated, shall we say."

As the baby boom generation crosses over into official senior status and the suburban population grays, older residents have not been shy about letting politicians know about their needs, and public dollars in Mercer County have been following the demographic shift.

In town after town, officials say they're responding to increasing demand and the need to keep their communities attractive to older residents.

"We were growing at a pretty significant rate every year since the late 1990s," said Lynn Thornton, West Windsor's senior center director and president of the New Jersey Association of Senior Center Directors. "We've been seeing a 10 percent increase in people wanting to take part in our programs."

Thornton said fast-growing West Windsor has gained four senior citizen communities in the last 10 years: The Hamlet, The Gables, Village Grande and The Elements, which is still under construction.

"In the past eight years, we tried to create more programs and opportunities for the seniors to enjoy with their grandchildren, a sense of community," Mayor Shing-Fu Hsueh said. "This will help them stay around instead of treating West Windsor as a bus stop."

The effort has been noticed and appreciated by township residents like Evelyn Barnett, 71, who plays bridge at the senior center and said she helps in the kitchen for events when they need "an extra pair of hands."

"It's the best thing that's happened to me since coming to live in the U.S.," said Barnett, an immigrant from South Africa who has lived in West Windsor for five years. "The staff is superb. The whole facility is grand. They make everyone who walks through the door feel special."

In the spacious dining room at Hamilton's center, Kay Grogan and three of her friends were all smiles as they counted their dimes and settled into their seats before the start of bingo on Thursday. Grogan said she moved to the township from Trenton three years ago.

"I came here right away. It was my first stop, and then I went to the library," she said. The center, she added, is "one of the best in the state."

Many centers trace their history to the years following the passage of the federal Older Americans Act in 1965. The measure created funding streams for programs that provide basic services to seniors at the local level.

Senior center development specifically has been aided by programs that include federally funded Community Development Block Grants and Mercer County's matching grant program.

In addition to Hamilton, Pennington and West Windsor, there are municipally supported senior centers in East Windsor, Ewing, Lawrence, Princeton Borough, Robbinsville and Trenton.

The centers' main functions include providing inexpensive or free meals through municipal budgets or the county's federally funded nutrition project, as well as health and safety assistance, transportation and other basic needs.

But while they play a role in fighting the continuing scourge of poverty among older New Jersey residents, today's centers provide much more than the basics. The larger centers offer yoga and tai chi, writing and computer classes, lecture series, legal advice, assistance to veterans, support for seniors' family members and caregivers and many other services.

"Today's 65-year-old is very different from the 65-year-old of 1965," said Grace Egan, executive director of the New Jersey Foundation for Aging.

"There's a national trend to make senior centers into health and wellness centers and incorporate physical fitness and preretirement needs as well as making them a community hub."

The change has been driven in part by the burgeoning cohort of so-called "younger seniors" who are 55 to 65 years old. From 2000 to 2007, Mercer County's over-55 population increased by more than 8,000 to 82,360, according to U.S. Census estimates.

People over 55 made up 23 percent of the county population in 2007, up from 21 percent in 2000.

In Hamilton, the over-55 group made up 27 percent of residents in 2007, a two-point increase. In West Windsor, their numbers jumped by 50 percent to 21 percent of township residents, according to the estimate.

Those kinds of numbers have made it politically feasible -- even imperative -- for municipalities to build or expand their centers.

Much as Mansier's group is now trying to do in the Hopewell Valley, a decade ago, a committee of seniors in Hamilton pushed the township to move them out of the two-room firehouse that served as their center, eventually leading to the purchase of a shuttered social club.

"What they wanted were health programs. They wanted recreation (opportunities), exercising, a swimming pool, a café type of dining area, which we have here. They wanted to be moved into the 21st century of computer instruction," Fitzgerald said. "Everything they required we were able to provide when we obtained

this facility, with some renovating."

Once purchased or built, the senior centers require steady funding streams from their municipalities.

Hamilton's center, which hosts the federally funded nutrition program, was allotted \$512,872 for salaries and operating expenses in last year's township budget.

West Windsor's facility has an annual budget of about \$400,000, which includes the cost of its own daily lunch program, Thornton said.

The Princeton Senior Resource Center, a nonprofit organization that receives 30 percent of its funding from the Princetons, reported expenses of \$369,304 in 2008.

While even the most expansive senior centers have tiny budgets compared with the public schools, they still have faced some resistance over spending, particularly for the millions it costs to acquire or construct their buildings.

In 2006, when Ewing was considering borrowing \$2 million to help pay for the conversion of a donated building into a new senior center, residents railed against the plan.

One speaker at a council meeting described the new center as "a luxury, not a necessity."

The township ultimately dropped the plan in favor of spending \$400,000 to purchase the former Jewish Community Center on Lower Ferry Road.

It became available when the county decided to spend \$7.7 million to acquire and preserve the property where the building was located.

Thornton said the challenges to funding senior centers have increased lately as the recession has increased the strains on municipal budgets.

"None of us want our taxes increased. People want services, but they don't want to increase taxes," Thornton said.

"I do know some of my fellow senior center directors have a great deal of difficulty getting any money out of their administrations."

Linda Stein contributed to this report.

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