

According to Statistics Canada (2016), people between the ages of 60 and 64 years old comprise 13%, or the largest proportion, of the population of the Municipality of Harrison Park ((MHP) which has a median age of 58 years old.

With the aim of learning how to make the MHP a better place to grow old -- in concert with the Province of Manitoba's Age-Friendly Initiative and the University of Manitoba's (UM) Centre on Aging -- four planning students, under the auspices of Dr. Richard Milgrom, Head and Associate Professor in the Faculty of Agriculture at UM, have recently released the results of their report, conducted in 2020-21, of the current conditions in MHP in regards to age-friendliness.

The first year planning students, Chris Hampson-Curtis, Carolina Herrera, Chad Rempel and Steve Nuttall, used a variety of methodologies to perform their study, including an interactive social pinpoint map and meetings with the MHP Age-Friendly (AF) Committee, chaired by former councillor, Doreen Stapleton.

Four categories from the World Health Organization's 'Guide for Global Age-Friendly Cities' provided the framework for their analysis, namely housing, open spaces, transportation and sociability.

Housing

Within the MHP, the “lack of housing variety” means that the only option for many of MHP's seniors is to age in their single-family, detached homes for as long as possible.

When that circumstance is no longer viable, and a senior wants to downsize or move into a rental apartment, the only option is to leave their home community to seek “intermediate housing,” defined as something “in-between independent living and a personal care home.”

“The development of new housing options for seniors (should be) a high priority,” concluded the report. “The development of this type of housing is needed primarily in Sandy Lake and Onanole and should be implemented close to the centre of (each) village so that seniors have easy access to village amenities.” Transitional housing and co-housing were highlighted as possible solutions.

Transportation

While the section on transportation was generally complimentary, it was noted that for those who do not drive, “the handi-van is limited in travel distance and serviceable range.” While not suggested or included in the report, the possibility of an electrically-powered vehicle was raised in discussion.

Noting that trails are “a staple feature of the municipality,” it was recommended that we “connect the Onanole Trail with the Elk Link Trail in Onanole with new paths to create safer crossings that link East Onanole to the Onanole Trail.”

It was also suggested that the MHP might want to “seek legalization for golf cart and possibly utility task vehicle use on municipal streets, citing that other small North American towns have adopted golf cart use on municipal roads to much success.”

Depicting photos of seniors on an electric assist bike, a tandem e-bike and a wheelchair bike, they concluded the transportation section of the report, noting that the creation of “multi-modal trails and pathways” would increase transportation convenience and accessibility, and increase usership, particularly for seniors.

Building and Open Spaces

“What we learned,” said the report, (is that) “the MHP Age-Friendly Initiative Committee has encouraged (local) businesses and organizations to improve their building's accessibility, including ramps, automatic doors and wheelchair accessible restrooms.”

They also learned that institutional and recreational buildings (already in existence) provide good opportunities for socialization within the municipality, citing drop-in centres, community halls, rec-centres and churches as the most popular seniors' gathering places in all three MHP villages.

Along with the long-term goal of Main Street revitalization in Onanole, Sandy Lake and Newdale, the report recommended that the communities embrace vacant lots and remnant spaces around main destinations,

transforming them into temporary or permanent pocket plazas where people can rest and socialize. “The outdoor spaces will complement indoor gathering spaces...with the purpose being to create inter-generational experiences all year round.”

The report also suggested that MHP consider improving or adding access points to the existing trail system, introducing amenities such as seating areas, shading structures, public washrooms and bike racks, as well as “wayfinding elements and signage to indicate trail sections that have been adapted to be accessible to seniors.”

A particularly interesting feature of this section was a photograph of a pedestrian-crossing in Sandy Lake, where shade trees, seating and paving stones were 'digitally' added alongside the road beside the existing drop-in centre, along with a crosswalk painted on the pavement, highlighted with the appropriate 'crosswalk ahead' signage for motorists, where the Great Trail runs through town. An easy fix and something to consider.

Socialization

“Socialization was identified as the biggest strength of MHP.” Recommendations contained within the report built on this foundation “to enhance the social experiences for all residents.”

“The desire to socialize,” it went on to say, “means completing everyday tasks with opportunities to stop and chat. Be it at the grocery store or the post-office, casual socializing is vital to a healthy community.”

Why not consider, it went on to say, adding protection from the elements in the form of canopies fixed to buildings above doorways or from umbrellas placed along sidewalks....to provide relief from sun and rain, making it more comfortable to remain outdoors. By way of demonstration, a photo of the Onanole Post Office was enhanced with two red and white striped canopies, a flower garden, a bench and an umbrella shading a patio table and two chairs. Who's going to talk to Canada Post about that, I wonder?

Finally, this last section of the report noted that “the residents of MHP are “no strangers to inter-generational bonding,” referring to the Seniors Dance at Onanole Elementary School and other activities with students – saying that “when people learn from each other, they gain a sense of respect and

understanding for one another.”

“I am proud of the AF committee members who took part in the process to make this study happen,” said Stapleton. “Their input from all areas of MHP brought the varied needs and concerns of our senior residents forward, resulting in an excellent resource for our future growth.”

Should readers want to see the report in its entirety, it will soon be available on-line in the AF section of the MHP website.