

The Options of Retirement: Mary Street Elder and Mixed Living for the Active, Artful Lifestyle

Isolation. Restriction. Quality of life. What do these things all have in common? They are three of the biggest concerns for our generation's elderly community. Senior citizens in many communities are taken for granted at every turn, pushed into forgotten facilities, and left to live out the remainder of their years cut off from a society that seemingly no longer wants them. Binghamton is not such a community. Senior citizens are an asset to any community, bringing the skills and wisdom they've acquired throughout their lives to the places where they eventually settle down to live. The elderly community is not one that is content to be complacent within the confines of a dreary retirement institution. Like their youthful counterparts, seniors want to be educated, to have amenities at their fingertips, and most importantly, to feel welcomed as contributing individual members of a society. A proposed Mary Street elder-friendly community in Binghamton's South-Side would not only enrich the area in which we live. In addition, the community need not be limited to only seniors, but could be open as an affordable option for starter families or students. But most importantly, the community would be able to accommodate the needs of a mixed constituency in a visionary and forward thinking way.

Why Mary Street? What makes Mary Street ideal to begin construction on a brand new, green, amenities-oriented elder friendly community? The adage says, it's all about "location, location, location". Mary Street is located between two of Binghamton's biggest draws: the center of downtown and Binghamton University. Downtown Binghamton, which has become known for its arts community, numerous restaurants, and unique shops, is only approximately three miles away, less than a ten minute drive. Binghamton University, which in addition to its rich academic life, offers theater, music, and sporting events, is less than fifteen minutes away, just eight miles from Mary Street. Why does this matter? Why is it important for a senior friendly community to be located in a quiet community between a university and downtown? Because, today's senior citizens want a more fulfilled life after retirement. Today's seniors want to experience a fulfilled and satisfying life after they retire, not simply spend the rest of their years trapped within the confines of four white washed walls. Our generation's senior citizens are more active than ever, taking full advantage of the opportunities offered to them. It makes sense that they would want to move to a neighborhood that can nurture a healthy and happy quality of life. Kiplinger's Retirement Report of November 2007¹ showed that senior citizens were looking to live in suburban areas like the ones where they grew up and raised their own families in.

Mary Street and the surrounding area is already developed, inhabited, and a part of a working community in Binghamton's South-Side. How, then, can we build or create an elder friendly community in this area? Simple. We build a neighborhood for the elderly within the

¹ "Family-Friendly 'Burbs' turn Senior Friendly," *Kiplinger Retirement Report*, 14.11 (2007): 14-15.

community that already exists in the area. At present, there are 3,679 people between the ages of 60 and 85 who live in the 13903 zip code.² Working to the advantage of a proposed elder community on Mary Street is the existing zoning and housing structure. Mary Street and the surrounding area is zoned as R-1, or residential. Granted, some of the structures that are there are falling into disrepair, but, knowing a proposed design for an elder community would only improve the existing status of those structures. There are at least two options whose outcomes would both be beneficial to the area: In creating this community, one: the existing structures could be demolished and replaced with new and updated living structures. The other option (two:) would be to update the homes that are already in that area so that they are both up to green standards and more aesthetically pleasing to the eye. In either case, the South-Side community would benefit from more visually pleasing, safe homes.

In addition, the zoning of the area would be perfect for a new concept in elder care and living. Because senior citizens are in need of easy-access care, many communities have recognized the need to have competent care givers “on campus”. With this need in mind many communities are turning to a forward thinking concept of 1 ½ story homes. These homes are ideal for senior citizens in that the lower level is a complete one story home. There are no stairs to climb and everything needed is on ground floor. However, because most of the existing structures on Mary Street are two story homes, it would be senseless to waste an entire upstairs. In order to fill that void, some communities have encouraged professionals, or professionals in training, to move into the upstairs portions of these homes. For example, a nursing student could live above an elderly couple. And that student would then work within in the community, providing care when they are not studying. In this sense, a 1 ½ story housing situation is win-win, providing low cost housing to professional students who are able to care for the elderly that live around them. While some may raise question at the thought of students living above elderly couples, such issues as noise could be solved with a detailed screening process before an apartment is ever even rented to a prospective student or professional. Because Binghamton University is located in such close proximity to the South-Side, it is a feasible and practical idea to implement in the Mary Street proposal.

What if someone was to counter this idea by saying that today’s generation is over-estimating senior citizens? It is an easy question to ask. With young people holding positions of urban planners and community directors it’s easy for someone to think that the young people of society are projecting their own wants on to their elder counterparts for their own benefit. Current reports have proven this untrue. Senior citizens want the same amenities that young people look for in the housing market. According to a 2006 Newsweek article, retirees are searching for accouterments such as: “Pilate’s classes, home offices, high ceilings and marble countertops.”³ This new generation of elders wants an active lifestyle, and therefore need a community that can provide that for them. What is either extremely fortunate, or a very happy coincidence, is that many members of the community who are not senior citizens want the same amenities. In addition to active lifestyle-based amenities, Newsweek reports that Boomers are also seeking to enrich their mental lifestyle as well. “It’s a sign that while 20th century retirees obsessed over golf handicaps, next-gen oldsters are more focused on

² “Profile of Selected Economic characteristics: 2000,” Census 2000 Summary File 3, U.S. Census Bureau, 2006, <http://factfinder.census.gov> (accessed March 25, 2008).

³ Daniel McGinn and Andrew Murr, “Real Estate: Not Your Father’s Retirement:” *Newsweek*, 23 October 2006, 52.

mental acuity.’ “People are concerned that their mind and body both reach the finish line at the same time,”⁴ For further proof, we can look to statistics. Company surveys for Pulte’s active-adult business shows “47% of boomers ages 51-60 said they ‘definitely or likely would consider moving to an active-adult community.’ Outside data from groups like the National Association of Realtors show similar results.”⁵ Kiplinger supports these findings saying: “boomers ages 40-59 would be willing to relocate to be closer to their families and to find a community with facilities that allow them to remain physically fit and socially active.”⁶

If there are all these statistics proving that the mentality towards living has changed among this generation of seniors, then why haven’t communities that follow a model of providing socially, mentally, and physically active adults with a home been created? Actually, they have. Not surprisingly, developers have picked up on this trend. All over the country, communities have seen an increase in active living centers which provide amenities not only to the senior citizens that reside there, but also to the community members who are under 40...and not retired. Take, for example, Brightview of Catonsville Assisted Living Facility in Catonsville Maryland. The site is 2.9 acres located in a suburban area just outside of Baltimore Maryland. While this particular community is designed for those who need help with daily living, much can be learned from the model. Residents of the community have private residential units and share common spaces which include: dining rooms, kitchens, fireplace adorned living rooms, and a library. In addition, Brightview has added amenities such as salons, activity rooms and outdoor areas to enhance the quality of life for its patients. The facility itself was built around the surrounding community “preserving much of the wooded site and reflecting the architectural character of the site’s historic structures.”⁷ Catonsville’s 2.9 acres has a total population of 39,820 compared to Binghamton’s (13903) 19,282. At almost 20, 000 people more than Binghamton, Catonsville houses 8,054 people over the age of 65 with 33.7% of the population being households of individuals over 65.⁸ In comparison, Binghamton houses about 26.9% of individuals over 65. From this information, we know that Binghamton does not have as many people to house as Catonsville, but certainly, can follow the lead of Brightview in terms of amenities and structure.

What about something more like Mary Street? Aren’t there elder communities that are not facility based that the Mary Street project can be modeled after? The answer is, yes, specifically the Burbank Senior Artists Colony of Burbank California. As many Binghamton residents are aware, the city has been fostering and nurturing a growing community centered on the arts. With events such as First Friday Binghamton is quickly becoming a welcoming place for artful activity. It would make sense, then, to assume that the artists residing here are going to want to maintain that fulfilling, art-centered lifestyle they’ve come to enjoy in their retirement years. With a seemingly large base, the Mary Street project could be very successful if it follows the model of the Burbank Senior Artists Colony. This community is categorized as multi-family rental, affordable, and elderly/senior housing. It is located on 1.5

⁴ McGinn and Murr, 52.

⁵ McGinn and Murr, 52.

⁶ Mary Beth Franklin, “Retirees on the Move,” *Kiplinger*, 27 November 2006, 1-2.

⁷ "Urban Land Institute." 2003.<http://casestudies.uli.org/EZPrint.aspx?j=7996&p=1> (accessed 3/26/08).

⁸ “Profile of Selected Economic characteristics: 2000,” Census 2000 Summary File 3, U.S. Census Bureau, 2006, <http://factfinder.census.gov> (accessed March 25, 2008).

acres of inner suburban land in Burbank. The community is made up of 1-2 bedroom apartments and is funded in part through low-income housing tax credits.⁹ The community is unique in its extensive art-themed planning. Activities include “writing, drawing, acting, and singing.” What is most interesting about this community is its mixed constituency. This is a place where elders and other community members are living together in a cooperative art-focused environment. The most noticeable difference between the Burbank vision and Binghamton is the size difference in population. Burbank is home to +/- 107,648 people compared to Binghamton’s 19,282. This does not mean that a similar idea cannot be translated into a workable community in Binghamton’s South-Side. If anything, Binghamton can only prosper with such an innovative housing structure. Ideally, Binghamton’s population would grow, not necessarily to the size of Burbank’s, but enough to create a noticeable effect on the local economy and culture.

The problem with creating a community targeted at a specific constituency is that it inherently excludes a good portion of the population which is not necessarily in the objective target list. Why not bypass this issue by creating a housing project that is not limited to just one specific target? While designing a community with one constituency in mind helps keep focus, there is something to be said for designing a livable environment for all, thus eliminating the potential for limitation, and creating opportunity for capital gain. As demonstrated by the above research, integrating the ideas of what modern day senior citizens want, with the new ideas concerning elderly and mixed communities, Binghamton could arguably become one of the first areas to capitalize on an innovative movement in housing and blended neighborhoods.

“Boomers are buying lifestyles; today’s 50-plus buyers are more affluent and crave a sense of lifestyle when buying a new home. They are not buying solely based on price or location.”¹⁰ (Cite Kiplinger Article 2) Taking this statement made by Chuck Covell, the president of Buzzuto Homes, into account with the previously discussed new demands of today’s senior citizens, allows the pieces of the puzzle begin to fall into place. It has been established that Binghamton is already in the midst of creating and nurturing a culture centered on the arts, education, and an active lifestyle. With these necessary facets of an appealing community already in place, it would only make sense for the city to continue along the path on which it has already embarked. Ironically, in developing a city that appeals to college students, and yet remembers its original constituency, Binghamton has become an ideal location for an active lifestyle senior housing community.

Throughout the course of Binghamton’s still expanding growth process, few people likely realized the potential the city had to become, essentially, a retirement destination. By happy coincidence, Binghamton already has most of the major components of a prosperous elderly housing community, like the Burbank Senior Artists Colony. While the Burbank model keeps most of their activities contained within the actual housing complex, Binghamton and Mary Street have something more to offer—and gain. Already the home of a growing arts community, Binghamton would be able to immerse prospective retirees within an authentic culture. Seniors would not be limited to the culture that they have created, and

⁹ "Urban Land Institute." 2003. <http://casestudies.uli.org/EZPrint.aspx?j=7996&p=1> (accessed 3/26/08).

¹⁰ Franklin 1-2.

exists only within the walls of a housing development. If an artist's retirement colony was established in the Mary Street area, the amenities that already serve the Binghamton population would be at the fingertips of retirees eager to live a fulfilling post-retirement lifestyle. Amenities already in place and serving college students such as—gyms, restaurants, and outdoor recreational facilities—could then also be used by seniors residing in the Mary Street area. And perhaps one of the most rewarding fruits of this proposed labor would be the daily exchange of generational socialization. Seniors would not have to worry about feeling isolated or restricted because the design would allow them to be intrinsically included in the genetic make-up of the community structure.

In continuing along this innovative line of thought, another proposal would entail creating not only a senior-friendly community, but a mixed living environment. Such a community would welcome starter families, young professionals, or students to live among senior citizens rather than around them. With proper oversight in regards to personal living habits, a respectful community could be established where all residents are free and welcome to enjoy the surrounding amenities. It is in this way that Binghamton could stand the most to gain. Without having to build very much in the way of amenities— they already exist within the community—the city could experience a large influx of people, thus benefiting key area aspects such as: the local economy, culture, and a move towards revitalization. And, while disguised as a integral coup in the battle to restore the city to its former pride, the Mary Street community could do something even more rewarding: unite the generations of this community while providing the highest quality of life to our senior citizens, ensuring that the fear of isolation remains a trepidation of generations past.

Bibliography

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