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Research Paper

Healthy, Happy and Active in Binghamton

Introduction:

People sixty-five or older are prone to an increased amount of physical and emotional health problems. This makes it imperative to address their problems while they are miniscule. The information to be presented in this paper will focus specifically on recreational amenities and the positive impact on people especially the elderly. Walkability and outdoor activities, subcategories of recreational amenities will garner special attention throughout the paper. This present research is the focus of The Catalysts for Intellectual Capital Leadership Institute (CIC-LI), a unique course administered by a student run economic think tank looking to help revitalize the Binghamton area by impacting the social and economical variables of the area.

Mary Street Background:

A theory that has been geared toward elderly in recent years is the concept of an elderly friendly community. The theoretical research here is being specifically directed at Binghamton, New York because an elder friendly community is being erected on Mary Street which is located on Binghamton's Southside. At the moment, there exists an elder facility at Lincoln Court within a five minute walking distance of Mary Street. This facility is an income-driven elder housing complex. An urban neighborhood within a small city, the area is registered with the United States Census Bureau as Tract 17 in Broome County with a population of 4,302. It is a predominantly white neighborhood (3,809) with the next highest population consisting of African Americans (267). The area provides 2,121 housing units, 1,892 of which are occupied. Medium household income for the area in 1999 was \$29,386. Tract 17 is a place of residence to 261 males and 454 females who fall into the category of sixty-five or older. Out of this total elderly population, 90 have sensory disabilities, 211 have physical disabilities, 24 have mental disabilities, 58 self care disability and 150 have a go-outside-home disability. Elderly who have go-outside-home disability have difficulties going outside home alone in order to shop or visit a doctor (Census 2000). In working with community leaders, attaining statistical data and doing "Best Practice" research, the Catalysts for Intellectual Capital-Leadership Institute (CIC 2020) housing research group was able to ascertain some needs of the community as well as the present state of available amenities. The Southside holds a great amount of potential due to its proximity to the University. It has a pool of talent available for its expansion needs as well as a scenic outlay of trails and other natural amenities that should help Binghamton attract several types of retirees. Overall, community involvement will have a positive impact on Binghamton because it will diversify the neighborhoods while catering to the needs of the elderly.

Goals:

Currently, more than 21 percent of the population in Broome County is sixty-five or older. This is well over the national average which stands at 16.2 percent (Aging Futures). In addition, baby boomers will soon start reaching retirement age which will cause a dramatic increase in the elderly population. In light of this fact we must prepare our communities and neighborhoods to the broader implications of this, because all facets of the economic and social strata will be affected by this change. A main goal of our communities must be to use retirees as an asset and resource which will benefit local communities socially and economically. There will surely be certain difficulties and adjustments that will have to be made in the provision of all spheres of life including transportation, housing, and community connectivity. However, the aim is to maximize assets by broadening diversity, interaction and physical activity so that the costs of elder care are offset.

There will be a specific focus on the elderly, making their needs a priority. The impact of these amenities is important because a healthy and sustainable community needs to be well-balanced so that it can service each of its members while considering its economic and social ramifications. Subsequently, through this integration, the community will foster diversity, tolerance and interaction by increasing everyone's opinion of their neighborhood. A positive correlation exists between an increase in amenities and increase in economic well being because it has been argued that "using amenity attributes as an economic growth tool appears powerful" (English 2001, 352). Therefore, Binghamton has reached out to the concept of an elder friendly community.

Who do we want to attract?

The idea of an elderly friendly community has propagated a positive message by utilizing the elderly in a positive manner while focusing on their well being and quality of life. An elder friendly community tries to incorporate the essential elements of a community which would expound the maximum benefit for the target group in question. Thus, it is comprised of several components the handling of basic needs (affordable housing, safety, adequate nutrition and information about services); the nurturing of social and civic engagement by fostering relationships with family, neighbors and friends; the exposure to work opportunities; and the prioritization of the aging issue. It consequently tries to optimize elder well being through physical and mental health while providing maximum independence for the frail and disabled.

"Age has very little effect on total mobility for those over the age of sixty when other variables are controlled" (Meyer & Speare 1985, 85). However, when *ceteris paribus* ("all else being equal") has been broken, assistance mobility increases with age while amenity mobility decreases. Retirees are broken down into several groups based on need and capabilities. Needs increase with age while physical capabilities decrease. Thus, in trying to attract retirees who would migrate to Binghamton for its recreational amenities, Binghamton is looking to attain elderly ranging in the ages of 65 and 74. This draws from the fact that this group of individuals tends to be healthy, affluent, and well educated and to place limited service demands on local communities. These retirees want

to lead a leisure oriented lifestyle in a place which is nice and has pleasant surroundings but is also filled with recreational and service amenities.

Street Design of a walkable community:

A sense of community is modeled through the promotion of interaction in daily routines. This can thus be ensured through physical activity and walkability which are key components to health and well being. “Theoretically, pedestrian oriented mixed use neighborhoods are expected to enhance social capital because they enable residents to interact” (Leyden 2003, 1546) whether intentional or not these interactions foster an atmosphere of familiarity and predictability that most people especially the elderly find comforting.

In order for a community to become more walkable, the needs and concerns of the Mary Street constituents will have to be addressed. Thus, the street design of the community should be reanalyzed to assess whether any changes need to be made to account for the new elderly population. In redesigning existing movements, there should be a hierarchical order with pedestrians needs coming first, followed by cyclists, public transportation users, special service vehicles and other motor traffic being considered last.

Connectivity and linkages between sidewalks are the surest way of increasing walkability within the neighborhood. This is signified by the fact that “Successful downtowns and entertainment districts often find a 50/50 ratio of walking space to vehicle space for maximum economic development” (Florida Department of Transportation 1995, 2). Thus, the retail areas surrounding Mary Street should look to this standard as a guideline. The elderly, the main focus of this study will additionally require wide walkways to accommodate people with disabilities. Seven feet is suggested for sidewalks that accommodate disabled persons and trees. At pedestrian crossings slip lanes (non-slippage strips), medians and bulb-outs should be considered. This is especially beneficial for the elderly because it decreases anxiety and minimizes falls since walking time and distance is reduced. This is imperative since busy crosswalks present more risk and this would decrease anxiety and minimize falls. Pedestrian signalization should be provided at a minimum of 3.5 feet (1m) per second walking speed and possibly increased in consideration of the elderly. In order to reduce anxiety audio/tactile pedestrian systems should be provided, along with light buttons at busy intersections to reduce waiting time for pedestrians (Florida Department of Transportation 1995).

“To reduce conflicts between pedestrians and vehicles in parking areas, center walkways in landscaped areas, “U” pattern drop-offs and long throat driveway tied with sidewalks should be considered”(Florida Department of Transportation 1995, 9). Other precautionary measures should include the presence of signals and placards to warn pedestrians and drivers of turns. Adequate illuminations should also be provided in the evenings for security reasons.

Since elderly often need rest time, benches, trees and flowers should be placed strategically throughout the neighborhood so that people can rest on their way to their destinations whether that is a restaurant or a greenway. Seating on key pedestrian routes should be considered every 100 meters to provide a rest point and to encourage street activity. Additional planting space would also be recommended because it provides shade, shelter and privacy while improving air quality, and the aesthetic appeal of the area.

Although the public transit system in Binghamton is underutilized, in attempt to garner a greater number of customers, transit should be made “convenient, inviting and efficient”(Florida Department of Transportation 1995, 12). Therefore, trip origination and transit stops should be no more than ten minutes apart. In addition, the stops should provide a shaded, visible, sitting space.

Cycling as a recreational amenity:

As a city of hills and valleys, Binghamton is a bicyclists dream. It is a recreational activity that provides transportation and a form of exercise. In building the greenway, bicycle friendly streets, and paths, increased interest should occur in cycling because of easier accessibility. Therefore, the City of Binghamton, in increasing bicycle friendly roads, is basically catering to the needs of the cyclists and community members. The future connection between Mary Street and the greenway would provide additional access to scenic roads, natural areas, waterfronts, as well as cultural and historic attractions within the city parameters. “Nationally among Adults College educated people are about twice as likely to ride a bicycle on a given day as those with a high school education according to TBI”(NYS Department of Transportation Bicycle and Pedestrian Coordinator’s Meeting 2007). In attracting people from higher economic spheres one is likely to attract positive attention to the neighborhood. Thus, cycle parking and rest areas (restaurants and benches) should be instituted at key points within the neighborhood to attract a new populace into the community. A cycle shop that rents or sells equipment, and other services could also be a reason for increased use of this recreational amenity. A further enhancement of the cycling community would occur through the implementation of a bicycle sharing program which could occur at various locations throughout the city including schools, shops and public areas such as parks. This would boost the neighborhoods economic outlook by adding business to the neighborhood. Finally, one could provide maps and well signed routes, which would help enhance the overall experience of visitor cyclists, as well as members of the community.

In providing superb walking and cycling facilities in the Mary Street neighborhood countless recreational activities will become available and accessible without the necessity of a car. Walking is often the most common form of exercise and easiest form of transportation in a close-knit community. That is why walkability can either facilitate or impede social interaction and well-being within the community. In connecting Mary Street to the greenway, the city will be giving the community members waterfront access and additional open space both much desired amenities.

Impact of accessibility on recreational amenities in the neighborhood:

Through signage in the neighborhood and on the greenway, trees, flowers and birds will be distinguished giving community members educational guidance and a place of interaction with other community members. This educational commitment could also be promoted through the use of murals and mosaics on walls, seating and flower pots. Different pavement markings could direct the population to various destination stops. These could be color or shape coordinated based on activity. Possible categories of consideration being the arts, physically geared recreational activities, scenic destinations, commercial spots as well as historic and heritage locations within a one mile radius.

Seating and adequate rest stops assured; the greenway with its connection to the river is a place for countless other activities ranging from fishing, canoeing, kayaking or rowing on the river. Recreational classes through the University or other means could be given on the river. The river as an amenity is tremendous. Countless activities could be organized for the elderly on the greenway near the river such as yoga on the river which would not only aid the physical and mental state of community members but also aid Binghamton economically by providing additional financial resources. The overall area also offers many sport oriented amenities such as golf, skiing, cross-country skiing, hiking and swimming which are to be found at a bit greater distance.

Oftentimes pets are pivotal for the elderly. It has been found by scientists that companion animals have increased emotional well being as well as social interaction among the elderly. Thus, there exist psychological as well as physiological benefits to animal presence. The city should expand the idea of the greenway by building a dog park in connection with it or in its vicinity. This would enable pet owners to go outside and have a daily destination for their dog walks. In catering to their pets needs people would be completing their own form of exercise. Thus, a dog park would improve ones physical well being through additional exercises while at the same time impacting ones social welfare. Social interaction would increase with other members of the community since people with common interests often aim towards the same destination.

Having discussed the potential recreational amenities which have been steered to improving the physical state and longevity of the community members, focus can now shift to the recreational amenities which are oriented specifically toward social interaction. In discussing the importance of rest areas, one can see its utilization in parks, squares and other open spaces. Although there is very little available space, our research group is looking into finding additional green space for the community. Regardless of the size of the space, an outdoor community place should be created. Whether it is a community garden that allows gardening and seats members on benches or a simple square that enables community members to play chess, or cards, social interaction will be fostered. In the summer time the greater availability of public meeting spots will lead to a greater occurrence of farmers markets and music venues. In having such social venues within the neighborhood camaraderie and community relations would better themselves. If the problem of a lack of space should present itself planners could also possibly utilize rooftops by modeling them into rooftop gardens.

Through neighborhood and amenity promotion in the Mary Street vicinity population attraction will surely occur. Increased walkability and access to recreational venues will undoubtedly increase not only community member activity but tourist activity as well. Mary Street possesses a splendid location that caters to people with a multitude of interests because through walkability and physical activity one can find access to such other recreational amenities as galleries, the arts, movie theaters, historical and heritage sites all within a one mile radius of Mary Street which through walking and bicycles does not necessitate car transport. Through the greenway one will be able connect to other parts of the city as well as observe the confluence of the two rivers. The city could possibly form an observation deck on the Mary Street side of the river so that people could observe the merger of the two rivers.

Best Practices: Barrington, New Hampshire

Several places have followed the elder friendly oriented trend with walkability being a main component of many. Barrington, New Hampshire fits this description. Even though a rural town that statistically doesn't fit whole heartedly into the picture Barrington has geared its policies toward elder awareness and inclusion. It has decided that senior housing should be an essential element in its first downtown plan. Barrington wants to strike a balance between keeping the town identity while at the same time moving into a more competitive economic direction. This will be hopefully achieved through a pedestrian friendly part of Barrington since seniors who do not drive have limited opportunities to work and socialize because of the lack of a public transportation system. Although Binghamton has a public transportation system it is fairly under utilized and through the Aging Futures transportation report it can be surmised that there is a lack of adequate transportation which takes away from the social prerogatives of citizens. Furthermore, plans for housing are being placed next to an open area which could possibly hold the public library in the future. Additionally, there has been a plan for parking to be located behind building so that streetscape could be preserved which will hopefully facilitate additional interaction.

Best Practices: Elderhostel Pittsburgh Program Series

Attracting long term retirees to the Binghamton area should be a gradual process. In this respect a way for this community to attract certain populations would be a natural process which would utilize the available recreational amenities and social programs to promote positive increased usage. The Elderhostel Pittsburgh Program series was founded in 2000 by the Jewish Healthcare Foundation and since its inception has raised over \$400,000 in revenues and has had over 5,000 participants. The program works in collaboration with the universities, cultural institutions, economic development organizations, libraries and other facilities by offering one day "learning centers" to explore the educational and cultural centers of the Pittsburgh area. Binghamton can utilize this plan as well. Through promotion of recreational amenities the city could sponsor one day programs or have a seasonal series which would be geared to improving the social and physical well being of the elderly. The focus could be around the one downtown radius in relation to Mary Street which is connected by walkable streets, and

bicycle friendly roads. The attractions and programs revolving around the greenway, waterfront, restaurant scene, historical and heritage sites as well as the cultural and social art scene of downtown would surely be a success.

Conclusion:

The promotion of recreational amenities in the Mary Street community and its surrounding areas will undeniably have a positive impact on community members, tourists as well as the elderly community to whom the CIC-LI research group is catering too. Through collaboration and adjustments a sustainable innovative development program can be fostered which will increase both the economic and social well being of the community. Increased walkability to the greenway and around the neighborhood will foster community involvement through an increase in educational involvement, utilization of local businesses, amenity and greenspace usage. The community will hopefully diversify and grow fostering a positive environment because of the varied number of amenities. This will hopefully nurture the elderly while at the same time expanding the Binghamton tourist base which in turn will help revitalize Binghamton by utilizing and drawing in additional resources.

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