Senior Living in the Kennett (Pennsylvania) Area: 
Implications for Planning and Zoning

While seniors (over the age of 55) are a growing population nationwide, according to the last US Census (2000), seniors are “disappearing” from the Kennett Borough. The greater Kennett InterGen Coalition was created to find out why the Borough was losing its seniors and to find ways to encourage seniors to stay in the community.

Studies of small towns such as Kennett Borough indicate that one of the most important components for a high quality of life is the effort of seniors in the community. Rice and Elder (1999) reveal that one of the major indicators of the quality of life in small towns is the community’s appearance. Rice’s and Elder’s investigations note that such communities usually rely on high volunteer populations of senior citizens who contribute to such efforts. Hanson and Emlet (2006) further report that seniors contribute with time, knowledge, skills, and finances to the well-being of their communities. The literature points out that those small towns which have few seniors are those that fail to thrive, for the reason that seniors are major contributors to the community, playing a critical role in its well-being and vitality.

So, why are our seniors disappearing from small towns? Although the research literature demonstrates that older citizens prefer to remain in their homes and “age-in-place,” there are problems that encourage seniors to seek long-term care solutions. In 2009, the InterGen Coalition, under a grant from Kendal at Longwood, commissioned the geriatric research firm of Jean Moreau and Associates to survey the greater Kennett area to obtain answers to this question. From this survey, administered to seniors who had incomes over $35,000 in the greater Kennett area, and to seniors who had incomes under this amount who lived only in Kennett Borough, we learned that the majority of respondents preferred to age-in-place. The problems seniors identified with living in the greater Kennett area included lack of sufficient transportation, access to senior services, insufficient alternatives for housing, and difficulties with the maintenance of house and garden. Of these problems, that of senior housing alternatives is perhaps the most critical for keeping people in the community. In Kennett Borough, for example, the majority of the existing housing stock is old and in need of constant care. Area seniors reported that home maintenance was becoming increasingly burdensome and was one of the major reasons why they would consider moving out of their home.

There are few options for seniors who are looking for housing with services in the greater Kennett area. Currently, there are 55 Plus “communities” (for people who are over age 55) and nursing homes in Kennett and New Garden townships, with nothing in between. There are few, if any, provisions for senior apartment living, group homes, or congregate care. The nearest HUD-sponsored affordable housing — Luther House — is in Jennersville. While many residents of Luther House come from Kennett Square and acknowledge that they are within easy driving range, it is far enough away to prevent seniors from investing time and energy in their old community. Furthermore, with the construction of Luther House and nearby Jenner’s Pond, Jennersville has built new shopping, businesses, and educational institutions (including expansion of the YMCA) that serve both the senior and the community at large.

What are the major planning and zoning issues that are barriers for senior housing? In our two years of growing as a coalition of nonprofits and governmental officials, the InterGen Coalition has identified four such barriers: transportation, parking, location in the community, and the provision of other types of uses outside of residential associated with senior housing.
Transportation throughout all of southern Chester County is a major issue. While there are two forms of public transportation – Scoot, a public bus running along Old Baltimore Pike from Rte 52 to Lincoln University, and Rover, a reservation-only bus serving seniors and people with disabilities – these do not appear to fulfill the needs of seniors because they do not provide either regular schedules throughout the day (Scoot) or are unpredictable with regard to pickup after appointments. Also, although it has been recognized that walking trails and sidewalks provide opportunities for recreation, they also can provide increased mobility to nearby destinations. The majority of the townships outside of the Borough of Kennett Square, however, do not provide sidewalks or pedestrian/bicycle paths for leisure purposes, never mind pedestrian access to destinations, such as schools, stores or churches. The InterGen Coalition has begun investigating how non-profit organizations can supplement transportation needs, especially in more rural areas. With respect to trail systems, this can be an opportunity for the Kennett Area Regional Planning Commission to explore prime locations for senior housing that has walking access.

It has been demonstrated, throughout a number of communities nationally, that senior developments and traditional residential development do not have the same parking needs. Why, then, should they have the same parking requirements? Communities in Southern California participated in a 2006 study regarding parking and found that, depending upon the age group of the senior residents, the parking needs were usually reduced to one space per dwelling unit (rather than the more traditional 2/du). A few of the towns pointed out, however, in more upscale congregate care facilities, that more residents held onto their cars, even though they rarely drove them. For housing for older and less wealthy seniors, however, the reduced parking has worked satisfactorily. Locally, Luther House, in Jennersville, uses this ratio for residents 62 years old and above.

Locations for senior housing have traditionally relied on availability of land and how well it could be developed. The InterGen Coalition has been looking at key components for bringing together residents — places for people to meet and talk with one another are important for all communities. These take a range of shapes from cafes to community centers, but all provide social connections, especially near senior housing. In the case of Kennet Borough, which already has a library, three bookstores, and a number of churches, stores and restaurants, the opportunity for senior housing is ripe with anticipation. Using the Jennersville model for less dense areas of the townships where public transportation may not be available, locating senior housing near institutions such as schools, hospital/medical centers and churches, as well as shopping, can provide more mobility and independence to people who may no longer be able to drive.

Multiple uses on a single site are frowned upon in local planning and zoning documents, mostly because these complicate parking requirements. From an anti-sprawl standpoint, however, multiple uses in senior housing – such as residential and meeting space for activities such as a senior center, special medical clinics, adult day care, etc. – provide built-in opportunities for a variety of senior-related activities. It also provides an opportunity for the adjacent community to use the facility as a community center or local destination.

In conclusion, modifications to local planning and zoning ordinances that allow for senior housing not only provides opportunities for our seniors to remain in their communities, but also improves the quality of the community for all.
References:


[http://www.housingsandiego.org/documents/Senior_parking05.pdf](http://www.housingsandiego.org/documents/Senior_parking05.pdf)


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RELA TIONSHIP TO ADJACENT LAND USES

As discussed in Chapter 3, it is a myth that all seniors want to live in their own isolated campus or building. This may be true for some, but it is completely untrue for the majority. Most experts in the field argue that the best place for many of these facilities is in the center of the community convenient to public transit, shopping, services, health-care providers, and family.

In spite of the logic of central locations, various historical factors including site availability, zoning, development resistance, and other issues have forced many developments from the center of their communities. This is hard to explain, since hundreds of studies of existing facilities consistently demonstrate that these building types usually have minimal traffic impact, generate positive tax revenues (if tax-exempt, facilities usually contribute to community revenues through a PILOT—payment in lieu of taxes), and are quiet neighbors. Moreover, they meet a growing need in virtually every community: appropriate, supportive housing for the growing number of the aging.

NEIGHBORHOOD AND SITE ISSUES

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12. Creating Courtyards to Capture Views and Ensure Privacy

The most important initial decision for any project is, where should it be located within a particular neighborhood? The old real estate adage that the three most important attributes of success are location, location, and location is also relevant here. Well-designed projects located on excellent sites are almost always successful.

An excellent site location has a combination of attributes including its visibility in the neighborhood, its land-use connection to the local community, and its sense of identification in the minds of residents and their family members. When a site has an off-site view, mature trees, good vehicle access, space for parking, and nearby destinations to visit, it often has enough to make it compelling and interesting.
A Site Within a Community’s Cognitive Map

Selecting a good site for an assisted living project is one of the most important decisions a provider can make in ensuring the project’s success. The following are a few important site attributes.

Mental Map Image

An excellent site is often one that people already know well enough to form a mental picture. It is within the “cognitive map” of residents living in the surrounding community (Lynch, 1960). It is a site that, by virtue of its physical relationship to other salient landmarks, is easy to identify and recall.

Community Connection

The best sites are not isolated but share a physical or associative connection with compatible community land uses. Some of these land uses include churches, day-care centers for children, retail stores and other shops, community parks, and elementary schools. When an assisted living building is part of a community, it is often associated with those land uses in a positive way. Urban housing for the elderly in northern Europe is often surrounded by shops and stores or located on floors above retail stores. These buildings often share a modest street entrance at grade level but are open to landscaped mid-block courtyards in the center of the site.

Well-Traveled Arterial or Memorable Intersection

A site location on a major road is likely to be seen more frequently and thus becomes familiar to more people. Major streets forming a grid are also the framework most people use to organize the mental image of a community. The perception of convenience to family members and friends may also relate to its placement on a major street. Marketing surveys often show that a high percentage of family members discover a facility as a result of driving by.

Proximity to Older Residents or Family Members

Family members want to live nearby so that they can easily visit. Older residents often feel more comfortable when an assisted living building is located near their home or within a neighborhood they know well. Having an adequate number of older people or convenient access to family members within the community is necessary for the success of a project.

Entitlement Permission

In metropolitan areas, land use approval is often contingent on a properly zoned or entitled site. Because assisted living is a blend of housing and services, multifamily residential, institutional, or commercially zoned properties are all potentially appropriate for assisted living. The character of the building, its scale and size, and its “fit” within the surrounding neighborhood are characteristics a zoning or planning board should closely examine.

Visible Connection to the Street

Once a site is selected, the building’s placement and orientation should optimize visibility from the street. The ability to identify the entry from the street reduces ambiguity and makes the building less mysterious and easier to comprehend. A walkway that links the building entry to the public sidewalk is a symbolic welcoming gesture. On a well-designed site, the building’s entry is neither too close to nor too far away from the street.
Friendly Inviting Appearance from the Street

An assisted living home should look friendly and be residential in character. Good curbside presence has as much to do with trees, flowers, shrubs, ground cover, grass, and other plant materials as it does with the architecture of the building. The building should exude street friendliness, making the windshield analyst curious about what lies inside.

Safety from Crime and Adverse Traffic

Site placement and building organization should mitigate any external threats from noise and adverse traffic. Safety from crime may require a surrounding fence or higher lighting levels in parking areas and public sidewalks. Most sponsors deal with security concerns by creating a single main entry to the building.

Reconciling Typography with Building Configuration

- Ramp and stair combination: Stairs are often easier for an older frail person to navigate, but a ramp is necessary for a wheelchair-dependent resident. Both should be available to overcome a substantial change in grade.

Site shape and topography are two of the most important factors in establishing the layout or organization of a building. Because so many older frail residents utilize canes, walkers, or wheelchairs to get around, flat, walkable surfaces are ideal. However, a good site location with a challenging topographic condition is often much better to work with than a poorly located site that is flat.

Elevators and a Compact Site Configuration

It is surprising how easily the design of a steeply sloping site can be managed with elevators and a site plan configuration that takes advantage of a site's natural grade. A multistory building circulation plan should rely on both elevators and a compact building configuration. Corridors should be no longer than 100 feet. Beyond that, many residents will have a difficult time walking from their unit to the dining room or elevator.

Exterior Site Conditions

Developing a flat, walkable pathway around the outside of the building is necessary to promote walking as a form of exercise. If a walkway is not available, it should be created. A pathway that has only ramps can be restrictive. Whenever possible, ramps should be planned in conjunction with stairs. In frost belt settings, ramps alone can be dangerous, especially for ambulatory residents who have balance control problems.

Ramps in Corridors

The designer should avoid the use of ramps within the building. Residents using canes and walkers can lose their balance, and residents in wheelchairs can easily lose control. Providers are often tempted to resort to this strategy when multistory buildings with high ceilings in common spaces are combined with dwelling units that have lower floor-to-floor height requirements.
3

Saving Trees and Other Significant Landscape Features

- Weave a pathway through trees to create a glen: Trees from the rear edge of this site were protected and used to shade this walkway.

Older trees often give a building site a timeless quality, making it appear as if the building has existed for many years.

Assess the Existing Landscape

A tree survey should always be commissioned on a wooded site where there is the possibility of saving trees, although one needs to be realistic because some trees cannot be salvaged. A building configuration can also take direction from the placement of mature landscape elements. Open or enclosed courtyards are particularly well suited to the use of trees for shade or visual interest. Units with views through tree branches or toward a cluster of trees are often deemed more valuable because of the view.

4

Serving Older People in the Surrounding Neighborhood

- Home care workers begin their morning: Ros Anders Gård (page 215) has an office on the third floor for home care and home health care workers who provide services to residents in the neighborhood.

Any building has the potential to serve residents in the surrounding neighborhood. Although this practice is not common in the United States, it is the cornerstone of organizational efforts to keep people independent in northern Europe.

European Service Houses

The European concepts of housing and home care are highly integrated. In addition to providing housing for older frail people, sponsors provide services to older people in the community in order to keep them in their own homes as long as possible. In fact, many successful “care and repair” programs provide home modifications in addition to care services in an effort to address both the physical environment and the service needs of older neighborhood residents. The service house is a mixed-use vehicle for accomplishing this purpose.

Local Neighborhood Connections

The vast majority of residents will have family or they themselves will have relocated from a dwelling unit that is less than 5 miles from the site. An assisted living building can be the site for the organization of neighborhood-based services to older frail people—just as it is in Europe. From zoning and land-use perspectives, our European neighbors have much more experience with
mixed-use buildings. The need for parking space is also
less of an issue in Europe. When a building in the United
States provides services to people in the community,
it is often in spite of the regulations, not because of them.

Promise of Preassisted Living Services

This has been a long held traditional interest of some
nonprofit elderly housing providers in the United States
who often see their mission as tied to the fabric of the
local neighborhood. However, for the most part,
providers are hesitant to broaden their service delivery
approach to include the surrounding neighborhood.
However, this situation is changing with access to the
Internet and with a bigger commitment on the part of
assisted living providers to help residents before they
reach the condition that requires a move to assisted liv-
ing. One of the benefits of this approach is that assisted
living buildings would most likely be conceptualized dif-
ferently by the community. They would be seen as a type
of community center that helps older people to solve
their problems, rather than only as a residential envi-
ronment where older frail people go when they need per-
sonal care assistance.

5

Mixed Land-Use Models

- Children’s playground is interesting to watch: This gazebo at the front auto
court entry provides a protected place for residents to view the children’s day-care
center playground at the Heritage in Cleveland Circle, Massachusetts. (Photo:
Peter Vanderwarker)

In northern European urban neighborhoods, it is not
uncommon for the first floor of a building to consist
of retail shops, with housing above. With this arrange-
ment, the street edge is activated with commercial uses,
while the housing above benefits from a quieter, more
secluded location. Mixed-use strategies can create a more
seamless connection to the surrounding urban fabric.

Mixed Use Is Difficult to Implement
in the United States

There is not much of a tradition of mixed use in the
United States because of land-use and zoning restric-
tions. Often developers of senior housing get a break on
the number of required parking spaces, but when other
uses are added, this economic and spatial benefit is re-
moved. However, some mixed-use projects (primarily in
urban areas) have developed in spite of this restriction.

Mixed Use Must Have Civic and Economic
Advantages to Survive in the United States

A good example is the Heritage at Cleveland Circle in
Brighton, Massachusetts. In this project, 90 units of
housing are mixed with a 60-person preschool for chil-
dren. Intergenerational programming benefits occur as a
result of the juxtaposition of uses. In a newly constructed
courtyard building, Sunrise of Sheephead Bay, New York,
zoning restrictions encouraged the placement of first-
floor offices and retail stores by providing a density
bonus. Valet parking on a slightly larger lot was allowed
overcome parking problems.

Benefits of Mixed Use

When a mixed-use scenario is developed, it often helps
to connect a project with the surrounding community.
It makes the building a part of the city rather than a
single isolated entity. In Rotterdam, the Netherlands,
the Humanitas project (page 158) is a good example of
how compatible uses can be intertwined. In this large
195-unit redevelopment project, a grocery store was se-
lected for the first-floor use. A corner of the site
contains an escalator that moves residents from the
street to a central community space where a mix of
community-based services and activities are provided for
seniors in the neighborhood and residents living in two
adjacent towers.
Another excellent example is the Flesman Center on the edge of Nieuwmarkt Square in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The perimeter of the building contains retail uses, while the courtyard has been dedicated to outdoor space use for residents living above the first floor (see color plates and page 55). In Helsinki, Finland, the Brahenpuisten Asuntalo project is on a sloping hillside site. The front of the building, located at street level, has a pharmacy, several retail stores, and a health center. The housing located above these stores on a higher portion of the site has grade access to a garden on the upslope side of the building.

6 Capturing Views

- Porches with active off-site views are often popular: Porches provide shade control, reduce the scale of the building, control breezes, and are convenient to the inside of the building.

Because many older residents typically spend more time indoors than outside, views of the surrounding neighborhood often take on greater significance. Two types of views are available for planning purposes. One is an active view—often toward a city—that overlooks the sidewalk, the streets, and the activity at the front entry. The other is a passive view of a garden, lawn, trees, a park, a lake, or a nearby creek.

Contrasting Active and Passive Views

Buildings often have both an active and a passive view available from different sides. Each view has its own character and rhythm, and residents benefit from access to both. Views of the street are hard, energetic, active, noisy, ever-changing, and stimulating. The garden provides a passive green landscape that is soft, soothing, subdued, slower in pace, and relaxing. Each view has its pros and cons. Activity begets stimulation and noise, while the passive landscape is often subdued—at times boring. Common spaces like porches and overlooks are better suited to active views, while the dining room benefits from the relaxed view of a lush, multicolored garden. Views from various common spaces should embrace the full range of view possibilities.

Near and Far Views

Views can be intimate, intermediate, or long distance. For example, a view of the surrounding neighborhood from several stories up is very different from the view of the front lawn available on the first floor. In some instances, the near view is preferable. For example, in a first-floor dementia garden, the immediate view stopped by a solid fence is almost always preferable to the view of what lies beyond through an open-spaced fence. In this case, the activity beyond the garden can cause confusion and agitation. On the other hand, hillside sites separated from the din of noisy activity provide marvelous opportunities for passive city or landscape views.

The Overlook Perch

One of the best views is one that captures both the neighborhood and the city. These views stir the imagination and lift the spirit. Units perched on an upper floor take full advantage of the surrounding environment. Views from a glazed, conditioned space are often more popular with older frail people than views from an open balcony, where drafty breezes and concerns about safety can cause problems. Both of these views are pleasurable but offer different sensations. Residents like a porch with sides that protect it from the wind, especially when it has access to both shade and sun to complement the climatic conditions of the day.