

News & Features

The Rise of Senior Housing

As the Flathead continues to age rapidly, assisted-living centers add memory care and the valley adds a new 55-plus community

BY [MOLLY PRIDDY](#) // APR 25, 2019



Immanuel Lutheran Communities in Kalispell on April 18, 2019.

GREG LINDSTROM | FLATHEAD BEACON

It's no secret the Flathead is in the midst of a building boom, with a focus on affordable housing in many areas. But the valley is also getting older, with nearly one-fifth of the population at least 65 years old, and the growing aging population is playing a factor in what gets built and where.

For example, a new housing development in Evergreen called The Woodlands will use age as the main determining factor on who gets to live there, with a requirement that condominium owners must be at least 55 years old to purchase one of the 144 properties.

"It is a huge trend," said Lance Fahrney with The Woodlands. "Any other major market has something like this where it's not assisted living but it's an age-restricted community."

The Woodlands, which will be built behind Shopko in Evergreen by developer Curt Lund, will be the first development of its kind in Montana, Fahrney said, because residents will be able to buy the condos, not merely rent them.

Age-restricted communities are growing in popularity in the United States; singer Jimmy Buffett has even gone into the development business with three 55-and-older communities called Latitude Margaritaville. Under the Fair Housing Act, these "active adult" communities are allowed if the housing includes at least one person who is 55 or older in at least 80 percent of the occupied units.

In the year 2000, Flathead County's population was just below 75,000 people, and 13 percent of those people were 65 years old or older.

Within the next 10 years, the older population continued to grow. By 2009, the valley's population was closer to 90,000 people, and 14.2 percent were aged 65 and older. By 2015, the percentage jumped again to 15.9 percent, and the state Department of Public Health and Human Services estimates that by 2025, 21 percent of Flathead County's population will be 65 and older.

Within the valley's development in the last 10 years, the Flathead has added several new assisted-living facilities, as well as memory care centers to existing facilities.

According to the Kalispell Building Department, at least five assisted-living facilities in the city added memory care to their campuses in the last 10 years. BeeHive Homes, an assisted-living facility with a focus on memory care needs, will add a second phase soon, the department reported, and Prestige Assisted Living added memory care in 2013.

But even organizations with a focus on memory care have realized the need to add independent-living services. Last October, Immanuel Lutheran Communities in Kalispell celebrated the grand opening of its campus expansion The Villas at Buffalo Hill, 36 new residences which added 58,000 square feet of independent living options to an organization that has historically focused on skilled nursing, memory support, and rehabilitation services.

Fahrney, with The Woodlands, said Lund decided to pursue the development after owning a condo in an age-restricted community in Minneapolis.

“There were 15 of these complexes around Minneapolis and every single one of them had a waiting list,” Fahrney said.

Lund’s research showed a need for such a community in Montana, and he wanted to put in amenities that he would want to live with, such as heated, indoor parking and a community clubhouse for socializing. There will also be an on-site property concierge, as well as 24/7 security personnel.

There are age-restricted communities in Bozeman and Stevensville, Fahrney noted, but they offer single-family homes to buy, not condos. The Woodlands would allow older adults to live in a community where they don’t have to worry about yard work or shoveling snow, and would have in-home health care providers, grocery delivery, cleaning services, tech support, and more. There’s even talk about turning the Shopko into storage space for the community, Fahrney said.

Fahrney said that given the aging population increase, the Flathead is primed for developments such as The Woodlands.

“Real estate inventory is tight as it is,” he said.