

The Quest for Senior Housing

By Jennifer Wake

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, between the years 2000 to 2010 the number of people aged 65 and older will nearly double, and that figure is expected to balloon in years to follow as more baby boomers reach retirement age.

With Lamorinda's population being older – relative to the rest of the Bay Area – Lafayette Senior Services Center Coordinator Mei Sun Li says the issue of where seniors will live and what services will be available is huge. “Without proper support services and additional senior housing, people will need to move from their homes and from the area,” she said.

That time has come for 75-year-old Lafayette resident Vic Anderson.

When the owners sold the apartment building four years ago where Anderson has lived for the past six years, he assumed the rents would increase. The catch was the location.

Within walking distance to Chow restaurant, downtown Lafayette and BART, the apartment's rents were grossly under market value. Although no major renovations were made to his two-bedroom apartment, which does not have a dishwasher or central air conditioning, and with a laundry room down two flights of stairs, over the past four years Anderson's rent has gone from \$750 to \$1,100 per month.

Yet when he looked for alternatives, he came up with nothing. “Chateau Lafayette offers seniors rents based upon their income,” said Anderson, “but my friends have been on their waiting list for 10 years. I realized that with rent going up, I couldn't do anything ‘extra’ without going broke.”

Determined to stay in the area, and despite his age, Anderson took a part time job as a parking attendant working for Bill Eames and Ed Stokes at Diablo Foods. “I couldn't ask for anything better. It's been a fun job; I meet so many people.”

Each year, as his rents increased, Anderson took on more hours until he was working 35 hours per week at the lot, but he began to worry. “What if my legs go out?” he said.

At the end of this month, Anderson plans to move to Seattle to live with his sister where he will no longer have to work, and will spend only \$200 a month for his share of his sister's modular home dues. “I've had a good life. I'm getting along fine, but this way I won't have to worry about it,” he said. “I'm looking forward to it, but I'll cry when I leave Lafayette.”

Mei Sun Li says the problem Anderson faced is not unusual. “It's not age specific,” Li said. “There are no senior apartments out here. And even if you own your home, but develop macular degeneration in your late

50s, and can't drive, then you have another problem.”

The Senior Services Center offers Lamorinda seniors free van rides to get to lunch dates or to run errands to the grocery or drug store, but only has one van in service. The van is funded by donations from the City of Lafayette, the Lafayette Community Foundation, the Moraga Juniors, and the Town of Moraga with additional donations expected from the city of Orinda.

“We can't take people to and from doctor's appointments with one van,” Li said. “But what people don't understand is LINK services (through County Connection where buses pick you up from home) are only for ADA-qualified people who have particular disabilities. If you're simply old and can't drive, you're not eligible.”

While the senior housing available in the area does offer transportation, the rent is costly. Of the few independent living facilities in the Lamorinda area, costs generally range from \$3,500 to \$7,000 a month.

“The main problem is that land here is too expensive,” Li said. “And even if you raise funds to build, people who own the sites don't want to sell. You also have to have accessible services and transportation when you develop housing.”

Li sees the newest trend in senior housing to be Co-Housing, much like what Anderson plans. “Seniors are buying homes together, with separate wings and a communal area,” Li said. “They share care-giving services and are all on the title, but it still takes a middle-class income.”

As the population continues to age, Li says changes will need to be made. “In the next few years, it's going to be an increasing problem – explosive,” she said.



Anderson stands watch at the parking lot between Diablo Foods and Longs Drugs in Lafayette

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