

Published online 6 Aug 2014 and in the Goldstream Gazette, Oak Bay News, and Saanich News on 27 Aug 2014

Senior cohousing ... elders flourishing together

by Brian Kieran



Sooke's Margaret Critchlow has hit the nail on the head: "Social isolation is more likely to kill you than smoking? Social connection is the key to flourishing in old age."

Margaret should know. She is president of the Canadian Senior Cohousing Society and a founding director and driving force behind Harbourside, a soon to-be-constructed seniors' cohousing complex on the waterfront in Sooke west of Victoria.

Senior cohousing residents proactively design and manage their own neighbourhoods. They create physical and social environments in which they can flourish to the end of their days. Seniors own their private dwelling units, share a large common house and common meals and take care of each other.

“There is a lot of talk these days about the silver tsunami, the demographic surge of Baby Boomers born between 1946 and ‘64 who are turning 65 at the rate of 1,000 a day in Canada,” Margaret says.

“There is a lot of concern about the impact of the silver tsunami from those of us who are growing older, from those who are expected to look after us, and from those concerned about the people and the environment that will be our legacy.

“Fear arises easily when I look at the options available to our parents and realize that I don’t want those options and, worse, I couldn’t afford them. Baby Boomers had fewer children than previous generations so our potential for being a burden is spread among fewer offspring, and for those without children, where do we turn for family-like support as we age?

“But I think fear should be a wake-up call, not a way of life. How about turning fear into a positive energy, a sense of possibility unlike anything the world has seen since the 60s?”

Like hundreds of other cohousing projects across Canada and the U.S., Harbourside’s mission is to be a sustainable senior homeowner community that promotes healthy aging in place.

The founders of the project believe “the physical structures as well as the social fabric of our community will nurture an innovative elder culture with lively connections to the larger society. While respecting personal privacy, we will foster cooperation, social connection and affordability through design and through the sharing of elder care as well as physical and social resources.”

In January 2013, eight couples and individuals became founding household members of Harbourside. In February 2013, Harbourside opened to new members with the first of a series of information sessions. In March, Royal Roads University hosted a study session called “Aging Well in Community.” The course is a requirement for membership in Harbourside and is offered regularly through the Royal Roads’ Continuing Studies program.

By mid-October 2013 Harbourside’s rezoning was approved and membership had grown to 17 equity members. By May 31st this year 28 equity members were in place. And there are still three openings for additional partners. For more information go to: harbourside.ca. The common house is in place and construction of 31 dwellings begins this September with occupancy scheduled for January 2016. These homes will range in value from \$300,000 to \$450,000. And each homeowner will have an equity share of the common house.

Cohousing is not subsidized in Canada. Participants are people who can afford to buy their own home. Savings that arise from the members being their own, not-for-profit developer are offset by sharing the cost of a large common house.

Margaret says there is a definite benefit for cohousing participants and for society at large. “Anecdotal data suggests that the co-care and built-in supports of senior cohousing allow people to stay eight to 10 years longer in their own homes, saving the health care system \$50,000 a year per person.”