

In the long run we are all dead: An economist's perspective on the impact of an aging population on rural Wisconsin.

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Patricia L. Malone, Community Development Educator

Rural Wisconsin is and will continue to be impacted by a challenge facing most of the developed world – an aging population combined with a smaller proportion of youth. The end result is a potential disconnect between what society wants and what it can provide.

What trends are impacting rural Wisconsin's future?

- Fewer workers
 - Fewer people who can be hired to care for the frail elderly
 - Fewer people to pay taxes relative to the number of elderly
- More elderly – especially 85+
- More demand for services
 - More need for transportation, health care, home care, and other services needed and wanted by an aging population
- Limited resources
 - Increasing amount of national debt limits the Federal government's options
 - With less tax income, local governments will be expected to provide more services while the money and staff available to provide those services is shrinking

Local government officials and community leaders can think strategically about their future. It is important to ask some key questions:

- How do we provide adequate transportation, particularly for the old old, in rural areas?
- How do we make our communities as accessible as possible?
- How do we create a community that is attractive to young workers and families as well as the elderly?
- What services do the chronologically gifted need and want?
- What strategies and policies can we put in place to deal with an aging population and the challenges it presents?

What opportunities and challenges does our emerging future present?

- Seniors want easy access to food, medical care, a safe environment where they can maintain their independence, reasonable housing, community activities and involvement; and an opportunity to connect socially.
- Worker issues:

- Much of what the elderly need in terms of services are provided by family
- An active volunteer/service community can play a key role in a number of areas
- Tap into the young old as a source of workers and volunteers
- School community service programs and “apprenticeships”
- Worker campaigns
- Accessibility:
 - “Walkable” communities
 - Handicap accessible facilities and services
- Attractive communities:
 - “Walkable” communities
 - Places to gather
 - Lively downtowns with mixed uses
 - Critical services are available
- Senior services:
 - Opportunities for volunteer organizations
 - Opportunities for entrepreneurs
 - Grocery delivery
 - Home health care
 - Assisted living and community based residential facilities
 - Clinics and drug stores
 - Taxi or van service
 - Cleaning and home maintenance businesses
- Transportation:
 - This is particularly troublesome in rural communities. Mass transit is not even remotely cost effective.
 - No one answer.
 - Volunteer drivers; van services; what else?
- Local policies
 - Do your zoning laws encourage or prohibit mixed uses in a downtown or residential area?
 - Do you actively develop entrepreneurship among all ages?
 - Does your Economic Development Corporation recruit businesses related to these emerging demands?
 - Does your revolving loan fund make money available to service industries for start up and expansion?
 - Have all your local government facilities become ADA compliant?
 - What has the local government or the chamber done to encourage ADA compliance in private businesses?
 - Has your local hospital expanded into nursing homes? Alternative medicine? Assisted living? Other?

We can choose to see the future as impossible or unachievable. Thinking and acting strategically can transform challenges into opportunities – for the elderly, for entrepreneurs, for families, for governments, and for volunteer organizations.

Sources: Becky Severson, Trempealeau County Aging & Disability Resource Center; Census Bureau; and the UW-Extension Center for Community and Economic Development