

Editorial: Opportunities exist in aging population

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Too often the conversation about the aging population focuses on what we need or can do for our growing numbers of seniors, and what it will cost us. Too seldom is the conversation about what the opportunities the changing demographics offer.

Several reports urge Vermont to prepare for a time when seniors make up a significant part of the population, possibly upsetting the current equation under which those in the work force support the elderly in retirement.

The Ethan Allen Report in December issued a report, "Off the Rails," warning of the economic impact to Vermont -- namely on tax revenues -- of an aging population on a state that already boasts the second-highest median age in the nation.

But Doug Hoffer, a policy analyst and a principal author of the Vermont Job Gap Study, also makes a valid point in saying many people lead a productive life well past retirement age, and the assumptions underlying "Off the Rails" are too pessimistic.

The results of the Burlington Livable Community Project survey released this week by AARP Vermont reveal the issues from the seniors' point of view. Not surprisingly, many of those surveyed said they want to grow old in their homes, remain engaged in the community and be able to get around town even after they can no longer drive. Some of the changes that would make life easier for seniors, such as more affordable housing, better sidewalks and more convenient public transportation, could benefit everyone who uses the city.

Catering to seniors presents other opportunities: Think in terms of tapping resources and catering to emerging markets. Here are some examples from Japan -- a country grappling with similar issues on a national scale -- as reported by Justin McCurry in the May/June issue of Japan Spotlight:

Colleges and universities offering discount tuition to seniors for a range of courses, some tailored to retirees. Here, some of those courses could tap the expertise of retired faculty or community members.

Convenience stores, much more ubiquitous in neighborhoods than large supermarkets, selling healthful, low-calorie, ready-to-serve meals targeting the senior market. This niche market can be served by local entrepreneurs.

A chain store that offers home delivery of meals to seniors, then reports back on their welfare at regular intervals to subscriber relatives via the Internet.

Right here in Vermont, University of Vermont graduate Rachel Lee runs Shelburne-based Armistead Caregiver Services, which offers in-home care and assistance to the elderly and those with disabilities.

In discussing the challenges of an aging society, the underlying message too often is that the older generation will increasingly become a burden to society and the economy. That outlook diminishes the fact that changing demographics also offer opportunities, and that a more livable community for seniors is likely a more livable community for us all.