

Prepare Minnesota Now for 2020

- Old and young share a vision worth heeding.

When Minnesota is populated with more elders than children and teens – in other words, in only about 14 years – how should life be different?

That question was posed on two recent days at two distinct gatherings of Minnesotans. The first was senior and distinguished; the second young (ages 22-36) and aspiring. The first included a former governor, a former Minnesota first lady, and several past and present CEOs; the second included grad students and young professionals. The first was cosponsored by organizations that provide services for older adults, Ecumen and the American Association for Homes and Services for the Aging; the second by the 13 non-profits that make up the Minnesota Leadership Council on Aging.

But, hearteningly, their vision for a grayer Minnesota was much the same, and much to be desired. If it is to become reality by 2020, it needs to be heard and heeded now.

Citing comments from the older group first, here are themes we heard:

Seniors should not be segregated. Neighborhoods should mix the old and the young.

Jane Freeman, former first lady: “Let’s keep seniors in communities where there’s lots of action. I love living in south Minneapolis, near the lakes and the parks and the activity. ...I hope for more opportunities for continuing education; discussion groups, book club kind of things, to stimulate our minds.”

Kate Zimney, residential counselor, Mount Olivet Rolling Acres: “I want to live in a neighborhood where the older population isn’t behind closed doors. I want interaction.”

Work should no longer automatically end at age 65.

Burt Cohen, Minneapolis magazine publisher: “Dad retired at age 70. I always thought that was too early. The idea of continuing to work and be active is very exciting to me.”

Sam Klimoski, GIS specialist, Martinez Co.: “Is there a retirement age anymore? 70? 75? I can plan on working a lot longer.”

Improvements in transit must be a priority.

Kathleen Ridder, women's sports advocate, educator and author: "My mother lived in New York City. Her life was full until she died because she had public transportation. We don't have enough public transportation here, and we need it."

Thatcher Imboden, owner, OurUptown.com: "We have to understand the issues and vote for politicians who will invest in transit in places where older people live."

Minnesota should encourage a surge in volunteerism.

Former Gov. Al Quie: "If human beings care for other people, their lives are so much more glorious and healthy. ...We're going to have all these baby boomers retiring. We need to enlist them to help people in the first stage of life."

Zimney again: "There need to be incentives for young people to volunteer to take care of the elderly, and for older people to give back to their communities."

The control of health care costs needs a lot more work.

Chuck Denny, former CEO, ADC Telecommunications: "We are expecting society to take care of us. We are stretching out our lives, at somebody else's cost. ...What are we going to do about the high costs at the end of life?"

Ericca Maas, project manager, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis: "The baby boomers gave us our health care system, and they apparently like it. We need to push them to let go of the status quo, and make it better and more affordable."

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The younger group posed a good question: Why aren't Minnesotans hearing more about the opportunities and challenges that an aging society brings? For example, why are these themes not central to the work of the Legislature this session?

Last year, a handful of forward-looking legislators from both parties organized a 020 Caucus and vowed to draw attention to the policy implications of demographic change. They have a promising idea. It's too bad that they've been so quiet this year.

That silence about generational change should be broken during this year's election campaign. Decisions this state's leaders make in the next few years can position Minnesota to make the most of its older population as that population begins to swell.

Real advantages, economic and otherwise, await the states that begin now to embrace the idea that elders are not liabilities, but assets to be engaged for the common good. Minnesota – long winters and all – ought to be among them.