

The Emergence of Age-Friendly Communities:

The City of Bangor

by Benjamin Sprague

Commentators and observers around the state seem to agree on one thing: Bangor is on the move! With the development of the Bangor Waterfront into an entertainment and cultural destination, the opening of the Cross Insurance Center, and continued growth in the city's historic downtown area, Bangor is attracting interest and accolades from near and far.

Bangor now has the youngest median age of any city in Maine. With all of the excitement, it would be easy for civic leaders to focus entirely on the younger generation when formulating public policy, but this has not been the case. In fact, a pointed effort has been made to highlight that many of the same things that younger people desire when determining where to live, such as recreational opportunities, cultural stimulation, affordable housing, and clean air and water, are the same things that older Americans want.

For all the doom-and-gloom talk about Maine's demographic challenges, what the city of Bangor has realized is that older Americans have a lot to offer in terms of raw economic output, mentorship, and life perspective. Bangor has been ranked one of the top places to retire in the country by *Forbes Magazine* and one of the best places to retire on less than \$30,000 per year by AARP.

How has this been done? One thing that has helped is that Bangor City Council has been extraordinarily balanced. During 2013–2014, the nine members of the city council represented every birth decade from the 1930s to the 1990s. This has brought diversity of perspective and the benefits of intergenerational relationships.

Beyond this, the city has made extra efforts to engage with its older residents through a variety of channels. With more government information and municipal services online, older residents are potentially missing out on opportunities. The city now records all of its meetings and broadcasts them on the local public access television station. City leaders, including city councilors and representatives from the police and fire departments, have held quarterly workshops at elder living facilities and senior citizen social spots in Bangor.

The city hosted an “Aging in Bangor” workshop and has surveyed local elders with the help of Eastern Area Agency on Aging.

Bangor has implemented a number of ideas from these outreach efforts, such as longer pedestrian signals, improved brickwork, better snow removal, and extra benches on sidewalks where senior citizens frequently travel.

More work needs to be done. For example, housing remains a persistent concern. With property taxes rising and many older adults on fixed incomes, municipalities need to partner with other organizations to ensure that elders can stay in their homes if they want to, downsize, or find a safe, stable, healthy, and affordable housing option that fits their needs and interests. Transportation is another concern. The city of Bangor manages a regional bus system, but costs far outpace revenues. The hours of the bus lines should be extended, the fleet of buses needs upgrades, and new routes should be added, but resources are tight.

The challenges for Bangor, as for all municipalities in Maine right now, are declining resources and rising costs. Bangor has cut services yet has still seen property taxes increase in recent years. The shifting of unfunded state and federal mandates along with major cuts to the revenue-sharing program are taking their toll.

Yet what has started to change in Bangor is the collective attitude about an aging population. We have a long way to go to be a truly age-friendly community, but Bangor has started to understand that an aging population can be an asset and one that we should build around in supportive and cooperative ways. 🐼



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