

Doesn't it seem like we've been talking about the aging of our population forever? Well, if you look at one of the hottest land uses in Tucson these days, it appears that our local development community has started responding to this aging trend in a big way. And the good news for consumers is that there are new and innovative housing choices for senior living coming into the Tucson market.

In the not so distant past, choices for elderly housing were limited. The assisted living industry has evolved over the past two decades to include a wide variety of settings and services, providing alternatives to the traditional nursing home or living with relatives.

In Tucson, one of the pioneers of assisted living is David Freshwater of the The Freshwater Group. Freshwater founded the Fountains at La Cholla in the mid 80's, bringing resort style assisted living to the market. Under his guidance, the Fountains evolved into an award winning community that offers a continuum of services, including independent senior living, assisted living, Alzheimer's care and skilled nursing.

Today, the industry continues to evolve and expand choices. Early examples of independent and senior living communities have been likened to a cruise ship experience, where everyone sticks to essentially the same schedule, with set times for meals and activities. It used to be unusual for people to be able to age in the same place, forcing them to change facilities as their health declined, often moving away from friends and even their spouses.

The latest and most cutting edge model of retirement living is the continuous care retirement community (CCRC). The CCRC not only offers the amenities and services of the "cruise-ship" type of experiences, but offers residents a wider variety of choices and flexibility than the traditional model. CCRCs allow for true "aging in place", where residents can move into an independent living casita, and if and when their needs increase, they can move into a higher level of care within their same community.

Splendido in Rancho Vistoso is Tucson's newest CCRC, offering high-end, upscale resort-style living for adults 55 years and older, with amenities such as a spa and fitness center, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, 24-hour concierge service, four dining venues, an 18-hole putting course, cinema and health center. Housing choices range from individual casitas to apartment style homes in varying sizes and price ranges. Fees include an initial buy-in, with people typically using the proceeds of the sale of their previous home. Buy-in fees vary widely, currently ranging from \$180,000 to \$750,000, but the majority of this fee is refundable after a person moves out, or is paid to their heirs upon their death. The second fee is a monthly service fee, which varies depending upon the level of care and services, somewhere between \$2,000 and \$5,000 per month.

Currently another CCRC is proposed on Sabino Canyon Road, on property owned by the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart convent. Jim Campbell of OasisTucson has been working with the Sisters to move the project through the entitlement process, which includes a comprehensive plan amendment and rezoning in Pima County. The plan amendment is scheduled to go before the Board of Supervisors on November 18th. Although the model is similar to Splendido, innovative concepts have been integrated into the master plan for the community, including a "main street" type of feature that will provide a small downtown-like atmosphere near the center of the community, where residents can go for commercial type services, such as a beauty salon, alternative dining



and beverage services and outdoor patios and gathering spaces. It is also envisioned to include a new concept in memory care, where residents live in multi-bedroom residences and a central kitchen. Staff members essentially spend their shifts "living in" with the residents much like a group home, cooking and interacting with them in a home-like setting.

Because the CCRC concept is new, current land uses codes in the metropolitan area do not specifically address the use. Splendido was developed under the Rancho Vistoso Specific Plan, which allows a greater deal of flexibility than a traditional zoning code. The Sabino Canyon project, however, is located in Pima County, and the developer has had to work very closely with County staff to determine the appropriate land use designation and zoning for the project. Because it faces a multi-step entitlement process, public involvement has been considerable. The developer has worked closely with surrounding neighbors to address their concerns. These concerns are similar to those faced by any higher density housing proposal: privacy, property values, noise, lighting and traffic are all considerations. However, CCRCs in other communities have proven that they can successfully co-exist with surrounding neighborhoods and can actually be an amenity to an area if properly planned and thoughtfully designed.

Several other developers have also expressed interest in bringing more CCRCs to the metropolitan area, based on the success of Splendido and other CCRCs around the country. And as the baby boom generation continues to age, the number of choices will increase and the quality of living into the senior years will continue to improve in Tucson and across the country. And, as these and other innovative types of mixed use communities become more commonplace, zoning codes and development standards will need to be examined by jurisdictions to not only allow such uses, but to promote them to help encourage a higher quality of life into everyone's senior years.

Linda is a Principal with The Planning Center and manages the entitlement division of the firm. She can be reached at 520.623.6146 or via email at lmorales@azplanningcenter.com

