

**“It's paradoxical that the idea of living a long life appeals to everyone, but the idea of getting old doesn't appeal to anyone.”**

**— Andy Rooney**

**By Stefani Seffinger, City Counselor**

Not coincidentally, in recent years I have become interested in the social and health needs of aging senior people. After all, aging is something none of us can escape. And with advances in health care and technology many of us will be living longer. Statistics bear this out:

- It is estimated that the number of people in Jackson County, age 80 and older, is expected to more than double in the next 20 years. \*
- Jackson County has a distinctly higher than average number of elderly seniors than other Oregon metropolitan areas and almost 30% of them live alone. \*\*

The World Health Organization along with AARP have developed programs and guidelines to help cities prepare for the rapid aging of the U.S. population by paying increased attention to the environmental, economic, and social factors that influence the health and well-being of older adults.

Many cities in Oregon and throughout the United States have created Commissions on aging to make their city more age friendly. These commissions focus on the needs of the elderly including , transportation, age friendly and affordable housing, and health care support. An example of this are senior advocates that help seniors learn about services, coordinate resources and identify gaps in service.

Senior advisory committees also support existing commissions to include the needs of the elderly when recommending proposals to their city Council. Examples of this would be in advocating for housing options like single level houses, age-friendly design, multi-generational housing development and a continuum of support housing, assisted living and long-term care options . Someone turning 65 today has a 68% chance of needing some form of long term care. Our community is lacking in these facilities.

For many seniors losing their ability to drive has devastating consequences particularly when there are few public transportation options available. Ashland has limited bus service and valley lift provides service only to those within a short radius of a bus stop. Riding a bicycle or walking to town are not realistic options for many aging seniors. Social isolation is a very significant cause of depression and decline in mental ability for seniors so getting to a volunteer job or the senior center may be very important. Other cities have worked to expand transportation options and develop creative programs to connect seniors to rides.

Looking at the built environment and outdoor spaces through the eyes of less mobile senior is another important role a senior commission can play. Examples include keeping pathways well maintained and free of obstructions and providing drop off areas that are safe and convenient for both older citizens and our many older visitors to our city. A specific concern that came to my attention recently was the entrance to the Japanese garden in Lithia Park. The beautiful entry includes natural rock stairs from the road up to the garden. Adding an attractive railing to help navigate the uneven surfaces of the natural rock steps would greatly increase the safety of this feature for unsteady older people.

There are many other roles that an Ashland Senior commission or Adhoc committee might fill. These include an assessment of the city to identify how to make it more age friendly. There are programs and checklists available from the World Health Organization for this purpose. Other areas could include a compilation of existing services and resources, looking for grants for new and innovative programs that have a good chance to be implemented, and working with both the city and the Parks and Recreation Commission to achieve city goal 6.3 which is to explore expansion of the Senior Center and senior services in Ashland.

I recently participated in a television program the mayor hosted on needs of seniors in Ashland which has reinforced how important it is to understand and coordinate the needs of Ashland's aging population before the need is critical. I think a senior commission would help fill this role.

\* Source: Office of Economic Analysis, Department of Administrative Services, Oregon

\*\* Source: US Census