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## The graying of Sangamon County

Rise in median age has long-term consequences

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Sangamon County is closing in on the Big 40.

The estimated median age of Sangamon County residents is at 39.3 years, with final census data to be released later this year. The county has "aged" two years since the 2000 Census and more than five since 1990.

It's also above the state and national median age.

"It's the boomers," explained Norm Sims, executive director of the Springfield-Sangamon County Regional Planning Commission.

Sims, himself a boomer, said the signs are everywhere, too, from retail construction to the number of retirement centers that have popped up in the last two decades. He added that the trend will have long-term effects in a variety of areas, including home construction, social and government services and health care.

"Look at the number of drugstores that are popping up everywhere. There's a Walgreen's or a CVS on every corner," Sims said.

### 'This is home'

The wave of boomer retirements to come has been well documented and is among the reasons cited by local planners for the rise in Sangamon County's median age. But there are a variety of opinions on just why it has risen faster than the state and nation's.

"The biggest reason, I think, is that it's close to Chicago and St. Louis, yet it's far enough away. You can get to a big city if you want to, but there's enough here unless you're looking for something special," said Matthew Stevens, 39.7 years of age.

Stevens and wife Heather, owners of Stevens License & Title Service, are both natives of Springfield. Matthew Stevens also owns and operates Stevens DJ Service.

He said, other than an eight-year tour in the Navy, Springfield has always been home, though he gave brief consideration to other parts of the country.

"I thought a couple of times about California, Norfolk (Virginia) and Gulfport (Mississippi), but this is home," Stevens said.

Chatham Village President Tom Gray said he thinks many of the village's younger residents go away to school and find jobs elsewhere while older residents have made Chatham their home and are committed to staying.

### Graying population

Carolyn Peck, associate professor of human services-gerontology at the University of Illinois Springfield, couldn't say why Sangamon County is slightly older than average, though she said several factors could be examined.

"You could look at poverty rates in Sangamon County in comparison to other counties and see, demographically, do we have a higher socioeconomic standard for living that might increase health or do more people have health insurance," she said. "It's an interesting observation."

Nationally, people are living longer, a trend that will only continue, she said.

"The fastest-growing segment of our population is individuals 85 years of age and older, and that just speaks volumes in regards to what is happening," Peck said, citing statistics from the Illinois Department on Aging. "Currently, 4.1 million people in the U.S. are 85 years of age and older, and this will double by 2020."

And one in 26 baby boomers, individuals who were born between 1946 and 1964, is projected to live longer than age 100 by 2025.

"Many times, what we are seeing with this older adult population is we're living longer, healthier lives and that's due to medical technology and preventive health care," Peck said.

Longer life spans mean individuals will spend more time in retirement, raising the question of how this time can be spent, she added.

"I think some of the questions that we need to ask ourselves if we're living for longer periods of time and we're healthier, are how much longer can we and do we want to work and how much longer are we going to need to work," Peck said. "... How are we going to fill this time in our lives with meaningful activities and meaningful interactions with people?"

Peck said the growing number of older retirees could provide a good source of volunteers for social and human service agencies.

**Serving the elderly**

Concordia Village in Springfield is in the midst of a major expansion project to provide housing options for the city's growing senior community and aging boomers.

"As we've planned the expansion of Concordia Village, we've looked at how we can best meet the needs of those people going forward. We think there's going to be a high demand for aging services and ways people can age in a very positive way," Concordia Village community administrator Mary Riggs said.

Its facilities are at Archer Elevator Road and Iles Avenue.

Lutheran Senior Services of St. Louis is the parent organization of Concordia Village and uses age demographic information to plan expansion projects.

"I think the growth (of seniors) in Springfield is unique to our community and says there's pent-up demand here," Riggs said.

Phase one of the expansion was completed a year ago and included more patio homes, independent-living apartments and assisted-living apartments. Riggs said people are steadily moving into these apartments.

The second phase, which broke ground over the summer and includes the addition of 64 skilled-nursing beds, should be complete next fall.

A final phase is expected to include more patio homes and independent-living apartments, though no timetable has been set.

"So over the next three to five years, we have quite an expansion that will double our size," Riggs said, noting that about 115 jobs will be added overall, not including the construction work.

**Hospital gearing up**

The aging boomer population was also among factors that prompted St. John's Hospital to plan a \$172 million expansion and modernization project to construct a new area for inpatient surgery and renovate four patient floors.

"We are preparing for a large number of older Americans and older Illinoisans we'll be able to care for, so that's part of our overall strategic planning," St. John's spokesman Brian Reardon said.

The project will include larger, more contemporary surgery suites to accommodate an increased demand for surgeries and create more organized clusters of rooms for patients with similar needs.

Additionally, within the last five years, St. John's has created a geriatric psychiatric unit to handle more patients with Alzheimer's disease and dementia.

"We're going to have older patients coming to us in their 80s and 90s when we might not have seen that before, and they'll have a higher level of acuity. They're going to need more technology and facilities to care for them," Reardon said.

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**By the numbers**

Median age in Sangamon County

2010: 39.3 (estimated)

2000: 37.3

1990: 34.2

Illinois median: 36.2

U.S. median: 36.8

Sangamon County population

by age group

nYounger than 5: 6.6 percent

\*5-14: 12.8 percent

\*15-24: 12.4 percent

\*25-44: 25.9 percent

\*45-59: 22.4 percent

\*60-74: 13.2 percent

\*75-84: 4.4 percent

\*85 and older: 2.3 percent

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

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