



Seniors in the City

With City residents getting older, the City of North Vancouver is exploring ways to increase the age-friendliness of the community. According to the World Health Organization, an Age-friendly community is one that optimizes opportunities for health, participation, and security as people age, and adapts its structures and services to be accessible to and inclusive of older individuals with varying needs and capacities. An Age-friendly community also has policies, services, settings, and structures that support and enable people to age actively by recognizing the wide range of capacities and resources among older people, anticipating and responding flexibly to aging-related needs and preferences, protecting those who are most vulnerable, and promoting their inclusion in and contribution to all areas of community life. The eight age-friendly topic areas include housing, transportation, outdoor spaces and buildings, community support and health services, communication and information, civic participation and employment, social participation, and respect and social inclusion.

Affordable, appropriate, and accessible housing is a critical component to whether or not seniors can age, and thrive, in their current community. In 2011, Central Lonsdale had the highest number of seniors 55+, in both relative and absolute numbers, followed closely by Lower Lonsdale. Together, these two neighbourhoods accounted for 66% of the City's senior population (Canada Census, 2011). Part of the why seniors are attracted to the Lonsdale Corridor is the availability of seniors housing, concentration of health services, proximity to amenities and services, and accessibility to public transit. In addition, the Lonsdale Corridor provides an easily accessible destination for seniors to socialize with community members, as well as access to parks, community gardens, and recreational facilities.

To ensure the City's housing supply is able to accommodate residents as they age, the City has adaptable design guidelines, in addition to the Barrier Free requirements of the current BC Building Code. Adaptable design refers to housing or housing features that are intended for use by people with disabilities or those who are limited in mobility. Adapting a space beyond what current housing design permits can enable people to create liveable residences where they can live and thrive independently.

Accessible transportation is another vital component of an Age-friendly community. Mobility and accessibility are particular concerns for older seniors (75 years and older) due to the fact that individuals in this age group may no longer be able to drive and/or have mobility-issues that limit their ability to move with ease. The role of conventional and specialized transportation for seniors, including public transit, must be factored into transportation planning and policy, particularly as seniors are expected to increase in absolute numbers over time.

A comprehensive seniors-focused survey was conducted on the North Shore in 2011. This survey, Seniors Today, found that most seniors on the North Shore prefer to walk or drive. For those who walk, 25% of seniors indicated that they do not feel they have enough time at crosswalks. This number increased to 47% for seniors who have difficulty walking. Therefore, crossing times should be re-evaluated to ensure seniors can safely cross the street without fear or anxiety.

A focus group conducted with seniors from the Lower Lonsdale neighbourhood in 2006 found that most seniors were well aware of the health benefits of remaining active in later life. The proximity of Lower Lonsdale and Central Lonsdale to stores, services, and both indoor and outdoor amenities, gave seniors in both neighbourhoods many opportunities to engage in recreational and utilitarian forms of physical activity. Outdoor spaces, such as parks and plazas, and indoor amenities, including recreational facilities and community centres, are popular places for seniors to explore, access fitness and wellness opportunities, learn new skills, and socialize with other members of the community.

Community gardens are also a much-beloved amenity frequently used by seniors. Community gardens provide access to fresh produce and plants, as well as create a sense of community and connection to nature. With many seniors in the City living in smaller units in multi-storey residential buildings, community gardens provide a great opportunity for seniors to have direct access to a green space. Gardening is also a moderate form of physical activity well suited to older individuals. In addition, community gardens can help to foster friendships between people of different backgrounds, ages and abilities, thereby helping to create a more understanding and cooperative community.

The cost of living on the North Shore is a significant concern for many seniors who live on a limited, fixed income. Any increase in expenses, including housing, food, and medication, can put seniors at risk of living insecure and precarious lives, including living in poverty.

To protect seniors from hardship, the City works with service providers regarding the development of an effectively planned, coordinated, and integrated system of services and programs for all City seniors to ensure a high quality of living. In addition, the City is an advocate for adequate provincial and federal funding for housing, support, and care services for seniors living in the community. This is especially pertinent to seniors who live alone and depend on support services to fulfill daily living activities. With the City continuing to age, planning for frail elderly and aging-related ailments will become more important to the health and vitality of seniors.

Making sure that seniors receive vital information from the City and other community organizations continues to be a challenge. While the City has a webpage dedicated to seniors with multiple resources, the 2011 Seniors Today Survey results indicated that only 39% of seniors on the North Shore use the internet to stay up-to-date with current events. On the other hand, 75% of seniors get their information from local community newspapers. While younger seniors were found to use the Internet more readily, older seniors tended to get their information from newspapers, television, and word of mouth.

Seniors continue to be highly involved in the community. Many seniors are walking, exercising, visiting family and friends, shopping, and going to community centres on a weekly basis. Overall, North Shore seniors tend to have a fairly strong support network of family and friends in the community. However, many seniors indicated that they do not socialize enough and cite busy schedules, health, mobility, lack of transportation and costs as their major barriers (Seniors Today, 2011). To overcome these barriers, the City has tried to facilitate the development of a variety of spaces and facilities appropriate to seniors' needs in the Lonsdale neighbourhoods, where most seniors in the City reside. In addition, the City also supports the collaborative process involving the North Vancouver Recreation & Culture, Vancouver Coastal Health, and seniors' organizations which seeks promotion of active lifestyles for seniors, coordinated recreation programs, and links between recreation and leisure activities, and social and care services. Overall, the City wants to ensure seniors have ample opportunity to socialize in the City to prevent isolation of this population.

October 1st of each year is designated as the International Day of Older Persons. The City recognizes seniors as a vital asset and commends their many roles in the community, including those of volunteers, mentors, advisors, teachers and caregivers. According to the Seniors Today survey, the majority of seniors on the North Shore felt valued and respected in their communities. The City supports opportunities for seniors to contribute to the planning and development of programs and services for seniors, to ensure these initiatives are appropriate and effective.