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Lancaster city gets age-friendly status

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The burgeoning revitalization of the City of Lancaster continues to attract attention and garner accolades.

Among the top recognitions was last year's [Forbes.com](#) designation of Lancaster as "one of the 10 coolest U.S. cities to visit in 2018."

Lancaster, it stated, was a "newly hip Victorian city." The components for this included a bustling restaurant scene, vintage architecture including some beautifully executed repurposed commercial structures, and an arts community that salutes the established and new cultures in the city.

And while being named as hip may be an obvious draw for millennials, it's important to note that the Forbes recognition may have led to another just months later when, in October, U.S. News & World Report named Lancaster the No. 1 place to retire in America.

That ranking centered on consumer survey responses to six factors: housing market affordability, desirability, retiree taxes, happiness index, job market and quality of health care. The answers were garnered from respondents age 45 and above. The survey was conducted in the fall of 2017.

Rounding out these 2018 accomplishments was one more: The City of Lancaster received a designation as an Age-Friendly Community later in October, a recognition formalized through a resolution of Lancaster City Council and heartily supported by Mayor Danene Sorace.

"Part of my platform is focusing on neighborhoods and safe streets and this designation goes hand in hand with that," Sorace says.

A formal designation

Sorace says there has been an increasing urbanization of Lancaster, leading empty-nesters, baby boomers and millennials to move back to the city.

The roots of the effort to get the Age-Friendly designation stretch back a dozen years, when the World Health Organization published “A Guide to Age-Friendly Cities.”

Officials with Lancaster Area Senior Services, formed in 2016, took a look at the initiative. The senior services group is a consortium of 19 nonprofit retirement communities that collectively provide homes and services for more than 13,100 Lancaster residents, employing more than 8,200. Renny Magill, vice president of development for Brethren Village, led the way, stepping up to serve as coordinator for what is now the group’s age-friendly information program.

By 2017, work on the designation began in earnest, he says.

Brought on board was Chris Kennedy, an Age2Age consultant who had experience with Age-Friendly Communities from the start; Evon Bergey, vice president of community initiatives for Landis Communities; and Melissa Ressler, executive director of Lancaster Downtowners, dedicated to those who choose to live in center city for their retirement years.

Sorace is clear to give credit where credit is due in making the designation happen.

“Chris Kennedy, Melissa Ressler and Evon Bergey came to my office and starting talking and saying this made sense,” she says.

A gathering interest

Armed with data gleaned from a variety of sources, including Millersville University research efforts, Magill and his team convened a meeting of stakeholders in early 2018. The participants, in addition to seniors and retirees, included folks in the transportation, housing and social services fields, the Lancaster Chamber, the county Office of Aging, businesses and workers.

Because planning is critical to the designation, Places 2040, the county’s developing comprehensive plan, was also taken into consideration.

“It was a true collaboration between sectors of the community,” Magill says.

Ressler agrees, noting that follows the philosophy of Lancaster Downtowners, an organization primarily geared to seniors, but including members as young as their late 40s. Many of its retiree members still work part time or in consultant capacities.

“Lancaster Downtowners really emphasizes the great parts of city living from the perspective of all ages,” she says. “Social connections and community are so important. We sort of provide an automatic support system.”

That support system encourages established residents to reach out to those new to living in the downtown.

What exactly constitutes the downtown? Ressler says that, in the early 2000s when Lancaster Downtowners was established, the downtown was considered any location within walking distance of Lancaster Central Market.

That sits well with the mayor.

“I agree with Melissa’s definition of downtown as being able to walk to Central Market — it’s like the heartbeat of the city,” Sorace says. “We pride ourselves in being a walkable city. We’re committed to safe — and interesting — walks for all our residents.”

Aspiring ... after the fact

The criteria to become an Age-Friendly Community is a bit different in that it is “aspirational,” Ressler and Magill say.

“We aspire to be age-friendly and then, after getting the designation, we get immersed in the planning,” Magill says. “It’s been a little more of a challenge to embrace the concept. The usual way of doing things is to first plan, then implement the plan and evaluate the outcome.”

Municipalities with the designation must commit to five years of planning, implementing and evaluating projects that make them great places in which to grow old.

AARP, which administrates the program for the World Health Organization, has established eight “domains” of livability analysis to substantiate the designation. They are outdoor spaces and buildings; transportation; housing; social participation; respect and social inclusion; civic participation and employment; communication and information, and community and health services.

The request for formal action by the city sealed the deal to move forward.

“We strongly support this effort,” Bergey said at the time. “We believe the city is good for all ages and all ages are good for the city.”

Landis Communities, Bergey's employer, is the developer of downtown Lancaster's Steeple View Lofts rental apartments for ages 55 and over.

With the 19-member Lancaster Area Senior Services, Magill says there has been an outreach to the Lancaster County Commissioners to have them approve a resolution to designate the entire county as an Age-Friendly Community.

"We have been asked to gather more information," he says, noting the board is particularly interested in the work of Millersville University. A partnership of the school's social work and geography departments has students surveying and collecting data regarding senior services throughout the county. When completed, this "environmental scan" will be mapped and shared.

Up next: The county

Joshua G. Parsons, chairman of the Lancaster County Commissioners, says he is interested in also learning more through the county Office of Aging.

"We attended a community meeting about this," he says, "and we saw it as a positive. We just want to know more of what's involved."

Like the mayor, he is gratified by the national recognitions Lancaster has been receiving.

"Lancaster city and county are attractive to all ages," Parsons says, "and we are interested in attracting retirees from all over the country.

"We have a good quality of life and types of places to live — urban, suburban, and rural. There are lots of things to do. I'm happy and proud of that."