

BY CAREY PEARCE, SENIOR PRINCIPLE/PLANNER, BOFFA MISKELL

RETIREMENT VILLAGES'

RESPONDING TO THE
CHANGING NEEDS OF AN
AGEING POPULATION

POPULATION PROFILE

The statistics are compelling (and often quoted), but the facts are that New Zealand's population is ageing. Almost half a million people were 65 years and over at the time of the 2001 census. According to the latest figures from Statistics New Zealand, it is also projected that in the next 50 years the number of people aged 65 years and over will more than double again, to nearly 1,181,000 by 2051.' Put another way, by the middle of this century, one in four New Zealanders will be aged 65 or older, compared with one in eight today.

The fact that New Zealand's population is ageing is not dissimilar to the situation in most developed countries. Life expectancy increased by an average two years per decade during the 20th century, but fertility (after a mid-century surge) has fallen to below generally accepted replacement levels. What is more, in less than ten years the first of the baby-boomers will reach retirement age. It is expected that the population growth rate will slow down over the next 100 years with the population peaking at around 4.81 million in 2046.

Another interesting demographic characteristic is that the proportion of women increases as age increases; 52 percent of those aged 65-74 were women (at the last census), compared with 59 percent of those aged 75-84 years, and 70 percent of those aged 85 years and over. To place things in a regional context, the Auckland region had, at the last census, the highest number of people aged 65 over numerically (115,765), but had the lowest proportion per head of population (10 percent). Interestingly, the region with the highest proportion of people aged 65 years and over was Marlborough, at 15 percent.

Anyway, enough of the statistics, even though they are compelling. New Zealand has adapted to significant demographic changes in the past, and we will have to respond to this slower growing and rapidly ageing population. As planners and resource managers, we may have had limited exposure to this phenomenon

in our work; but most people will have been touched in some way by experiences with elderly relatives and their future care and well-being. The truth is, of course, that we will all be there one day. The growth in retirement villages as a residential accommodation lifestyle and care option is undoubtedly a response to this changing demographic profile. The village component is clearly a quest for community, whilst elements of security and certainty also rank highly amongst people's aspirations.

POLICY RESPONSES

It would probably be fair to say that the traditional treatment of housing for elderly, as it has been known, within regional and district planning documents, has been relatively low key to this point. Traditional issues with retirement villages have focused on forms of security/tenure, management fees and factors which exercise legal advisors and bank managers, whilst people in local government have been concerned about potential providers circumventing rules on density and various other well meaning, but perfunctory, development controls. With the emergence of major providers such as Ryman Healthcare and Metlifecare in the marketplace, however, more recognition has been given to the need for flexibility in the planning and



Above: Grace Joel Retirement Village in St Heliers, Auckland: Onsite amenity, building design and quality are important features.



Left: Grace Joel Retirement Village Auckland: An example of the adaptive reuse of an existing healthcare facility



Right: Grace Joel Retirement Village Auckland: Indoor swimming pool, internal facilities are important as well

implementation of such facilities. There has been acceptance that site master planning, landscape and design features and reduced parking ratios can be a feature of retirement village developments where the operators are endeavouring to achieve a high level of environmental amenity themselves.

One policy response at a district level to the growth in retirement villages has been Proposed Plan Change No 26 to the Auckland City Operative District Plan (Isthmus Section 1999). Although this proposed change focuses on a range of residential activities and submissions still have to be heard, it does seek to recognise retirement villages as an activity and thinks through the need to provide for housing for the elderly in various guises. Within the proposed change, the term "retirement village" is defined as:

"...a comprehensive residential development providing housing, recreation, welfare and medical facilities which is intended for the care and accommodation of disabled, infirm, elderly or retired persons. It will include a combination of rest home/care hospital beds, serviced apartments/units and residential units, which are held either under one title or unit titles under the Unit Titles Act which is encumbered by an appropriate legal instrument which ensures that the use of the unit is confined to such persons."

This more explicit recognition of the retirement village as an activity is a useful

start for the major providers, who face significant difficulties in securing appropriate sites within host communities. Research has shown that elderly people want to stay within their local community and do not, for the most part, want to be consigned to the greenfields at the end of the motorway. They want to remain as active as they can within the community and want to be accessible to family and friends. These aspirations mean that there is a premium on securing larger urban sites with characteristics that can complement a successful village operation. Ryman Healthcare's Grace Joel retirement village in St Heliers is a good example of the adaptive reuse of another facility, the former Seventh Day Adventist Hospital site and buildings, as the core of a new integrated retirement village. This village is nearing completion and has been very well received within the local community. In this case, the provider consulted widely with neighbours and key stakeholders as part of a private plan change process, which provided the framework for the development of the village.

VILLAGE CHARACTERISTICS

Typically a modern integrated retirement village provides the following residential and care options:

- Independent apartments (townhouses or villas) for residents who want a significant level of independence

- Serviced apartments and studio units for residents who have a reasonable requirement for care

- A rest home, hospital or special care unit for residents who require an advanced or high level of care

Nurses, caregivers and visiting doctors are an integral part of the village operations, whilst community centres, bowling greens, swimming pools and billiard tables are common recreational features.³ The communal facilities are often a reflection of the collective buying power of the residents and further engender the notion of village or community. Onsite and indoor amenities need to be attractive to potential residents to make the village work and the community vibrant. It is accepted that the retirement village options may not suit everyone, and indeed, may not be available to everyone because of the initial cost of securing occupancy rights and in paying ongoing fees, but it is nonetheless a viable path for many.

Whilst Proposed Plan Change 26 lists retirement villages as discretionary activities in a number of residential zones within Auckland City, it does not contemplate other siting options, for example, business zoned land. Such options cannot be discounted in the future as the urban land resource becomes scarcer. The Plan Change does however identify some further criteria to be considered in relation to retirement village application proposals. These criteria relate to the

following characteristics:

- Site amenity, streetscape character and pedestrian amenity
 - Building scale, form and layout
 - Visual privacy and aural amenity
 - Site facilities
 - Car parking
 - Location and design of vehicular and pedestrian access
- Intensity and scale

These criteria take account of the main effects and characteristics of retirement villages as they interact with the host environment. They also acknowledge that the physical characteristics of future villages may change from the typical single level expansive setting of old. Future villages are likely to exhibit quite different features as convenient and lively locations are sought.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

With changing lifestyle preferences and our ageing population profile, communities and decision makers are increasingly going to need to adapt/respond to retirement villages, both as a land use activity and a community reality. They will need to adapt to more intensive types of development that may in some instances be multi-storey in their configuration. To ensure such facilities remain desirable residential/care options for the elderly, providers on the other hand will need to ensure a high level of onsite amenity, creative and quality design and construction. Regional policy initiatives will also need to accept that likely retirement nodes will evolve, and that they will need the required physical and community infrastructure. We all know New Zealand is an attractive place to live and so it should be in retirement.

FOOTNOTES

1. Statistics New Zealand, 2001 Census Snapshot 9, 29 May 2002.
2. The Auckland City Council, Proposed Plan Modification No 26, May 2002.
3. Ryman Healthcare Ltd, Annual Report 2003.

The writer and Boffa Miskell Ltd provide professional and planning advice to Ryman Healthcare Ltd throughout New Zealand.