

## SENIOR-FRIENDLY LIVING

# Some new ideas on elder housing

**By Thomas Goldsmith**

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Today's concept of livable and senior-friendly communities can be pretty basic:

A small-town pharmacy installs a call button outside so older people who can't get out of their cars can buzz employees for help.

In years to come, however, it could entail big changes in the way towns and neighborhoods are laid out, ending the need for many older people to live in nursing and rest homes.

As tens of millions of aging baby boomers dread the prospect of moving into assisted living or nursing homes, more homelike and self-directed settings are getting attention.

"There are 1.6 million people in nursing homes now. My goal is to have that number be zero," said Dr. William Thomas, a Harvard-trained geria-

trician. "I foresee an America that no longer institutionalizes its elders," he said.

Among the options is a growing movement called elder co-housing.

The non-profit group Second Journey in Orange County, N.C., hopes to start a community that is modeled on a concept going strong in Abingdon, Va. There, the ElderSpirit Community offers 29 units, both owned and rented, to older people who see spiritual growth as a primary goal of later life.

In such communities, a communal center used for meals and fellowship unites people who live in separate homes.

Everyone must commit to giving or receiving help as situations arise, said Catherine Rumschlag, community coordinator for ElderSpirit.

"We would use the hospital and facilities of the town, but

### The numbers

► **According** to the U.S. Census Bureau, a substantial increase in the number of elderly in the country will occur when Baby Boomers turn 65 in 2011.

► **The elderly** population is expected to double from 36 million in 2003 to 72 million in 2030, an increase from 12 percent of the population to 20 percent.

► **By 2050** the elderly population is expected to be 86.7 million.

we would try to help each other as an extended family would," Rumschlag said. "We hope that usually people would be able to stay until they die, but we don't guarantee that."

The Orange County community would be similar to ElderSpirit.

"We have got a committed group of 12 that have been

meeting with pretty much regularity," said Second Journey chairman Anthony Bolton.

He said finding affordable land is a challenge.

The concept of senior-friendly communities touches nearly every aspect of older people's lives and often crosses over to a broader population.

Establishing a big-picture kind of senior-friendly community would, for one thing, require a change in thinking from the few options of long-term care available today — home, assisted living and nursing homes, Thomas said.

Too ambitious?

Not too many decades ago, the geriatrician pointed out, consumers could mostly choose from only three flavors of ice cream.

"As the boomers begin to transform this field," he said, "there are going to be 1,000 flavors of support."