

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Expert on aging tells Maine study panel: 'Being 60 has a lot in common with being 20 these days'

By Mario Moretto, BDN Staff

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AUGUSTA, Maine — Maine's seniors and young people — two groups often discussed by the state's political leaders and policy wonks — have more in common than they have differences, said a top government official on aging from Vermont.

Both groups are often unsure about their futures, said Dr. Susan Wehry, a geriatric psychiatrist and Vermont's commissioner of the Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living. The mindset is the same, whether you're a recent college graduate or a senior leaving the workforce and entering retirement.

They also have shared priorities in walkable neighborhoods, public transportation, visible police presence and affordable housing, she said. For young people, these factors are indicators that an area is an inviting place to settle down and raise children. For the elderly, they ensure a means to stay connected to community in old age.

"Being 60 has a lot in common with being 20 these days," she said. "At 20, you're wondering what you're going to do next, and that's what 60-year-olds are asking themselves as well."

Two big demographic problems face the state: How to deal with the huge and still-growing population of senior citizens — and the costs associated with that population — and how to attract more young, productive people to settle here.

But what if there were programs or policy initiatives that could attack both problems at once? Wehry said the young and the old have more shared priorities than might be apparent at first glance, and that Maine would do well to seek out solutions that help both demographic groups at the same time.

The Vermont commissioner spoke at the second meeting of the Speaker's Round Table on Aging in Maine, a large panel designed by Maine House Speaker Mark Eves, D-North Berwick, to cull ideas that could lead to legislation for the next session, which begins in January. In September, economist Charlie Colgan told the panel that if Maine didn't boost its youth population, the number of seniors **could spell financial ruin**.

Maine is the oldest state in the nation, per capita, and its population of older residents is growing rapidly. U.S. census data show that 21 percent of the state's population is 60 or older and that by 2030, one-quarter of Mainers will be older than 65.

Wehry said 20-year-olds and 60-year-olds need "thriving, livable" communities. She gave examples of things big and small that benefit both populations. A small example:

"Think about curb cuts," she said. "If you're making it easier for people with wheelchairs or walkers to cross the street, you're making it easy for people jogging with baby strollers."

Later, in an interview, she gave another example: "We have a big thing in Vermont called HomeShare, where we partner people, oftentimes young and old people. An old person has a house, a young person has a need

for a place to live. So we match those people,” she said. The young person either pays rent, which helps seniors on fixed incomes, or helps maintain the house by doing chores the older homeowner can no longer perform.

It’s an idea that intrigued Peter Merrill, deputy director of the Maine State Housing Authority. Merrill, a member of the Speaker’s Round Table, said there has been a shift in demand for housing over the past generation. Where people used to want to “fix up” older homes in rural areas, people today are more interested in living in urban environments.

“There are so many people growing older in the homes they love, and they don’t want to move,” he said. “They have much more house than they need.”

Portland architect Evan Carroll is not a member of the panel, but has written and spoken at length about the ways communities can be built — literally and figuratively — for cross-generational benefit. Without having heard Wehry speak, he echoed her sentiments.

He agreed that more diverse housing options are important. For example, he said, towns need to lift proscriptions on accessory housing and caps on the number of people who can live under one roof. But the issue is deeper, he said.

The thing young and old have in common is that they need help from other people, according to Carroll. Often they are low-income, and living in the kind of thriving communities described by Wehry helps mitigate income barriers.

“What those communities have are people who are connected to each other,” he said. “When you meet those people, they’ll introduce you to someone else, and you end up meeting people that fulfill each other’s mutual needs.”

The panel will meet again on Oct. 15 and 29, and is expected to make policy recommendations to the full Legislature when the House and Senate reconvene in January.

“There are two pieces to the puzzle, [policies for] those entering the workforce and a long-term system that ensures people age with dignity,” Eves said in an interview. “We have to think of this in a big-picture way, where all are involved — our young, our middle-aged, and those that are aging.”

Follow Mario Moretto on Twitter at @riocarmine.

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