

Canadian gay retirement community planned for West coast



In Santa Fe, RainbowVision's pioneering community. The El Centro clubhouse entrance. Vancouver's project will reflect its own city's style.

five years from now, Dean Malone hopes to be drinking coffee in a terrific restaurant within the upscale gay retirement complex he is planning. That's how long the chief executive officer of Plum Living expects it will take to convert the files on his desk into a pioneering development that brings together lifestyle, choice and access to health care for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) community in Canada.

Already, Malone is off to a flying start, collecting 16,000 survey responses about his plan for a complex of 125 to 150 condos, with a mix of independent living and continuing care units. Plum Living has a core planning group in place, and has an American development partner, RainbowVision, a leader in this field with a two-year-old complex in Santa Fe, New Mexico, as well as projects well underway in California's Palm Springs, and the San Francisco Bay area.

"It's a private market development," Malone says, "but we're approaching it on a grassroots model." The LGBT community

has long had concerns about finding gay-friendly assisted care and about fitting into the expectations of mainstream retirement residences. "We've talked about this in our community for years and years. Now we've moved from talking to doing," says Malone who has 15 years' experience in planning and management in corporate, non-profit and health care sectors.

First his company wanted to hear from the LGBT community directly, so ads were placed, questionnaires were sent and meetings were held. "Who are you? Where are you? What do you want?" Thousands of replies came back from east to west in Canada and from 14 American states, from people ranging in age from 32 to 75.

They said they want something very like RainbowVision's complex in Santa Fe, "a place where your neighbors are your family and everyone belongs," a place with a first-class spa and fitness centre, restaurant, lounge and cabaret, a beautiful view and a strong sense of design and creativity.

And, says RainbowVision's dynamic founder and chief executive officer Joy Silver, since the LGBT community is usually a minority, "this is an opportunity to live in majority that we don't often get. . ."

This chance "to be who we are," is intended for people "in their second 50 years of their lives," but the company doesn't discriminate against younger people or heterosexuals. About 25 per cent of their condo buyers are straight, perhaps drawn by the creativity of the community, Silver says. As they build these new communities, Malone and Silver are aware they are forging new paths in the retirement housing field. "Gay people set trends in fashion and music; this is a trend we're setting," Silver says. Much of their approach could also apply to the highly anticipated Boomer market. For example, Silver says, members of the LGBT community have long experience in creating a "family of choice," as opposed to a blood family. Now many mainstream Baby Boomers are creating

Taking stock: seniors' housing needs in Atlantic Canada

similar circles of support as their children grow up and move away.

The Boomers will make their own decisions about how and where they live in later years, Silver says. Some may chose to retire; some may never stop working. For residents still working 9 to 5, RainbowVision offers "life made easy," with concierge services, a nearby fitness centre and a restaurant and cabaret to meet friends after work. "It's like a golf club without the golf," Silver says. Maybe no golf, but lots of art, music, theatre, contests, fundraising and other programs to pull people together.

"We don't use the word 'seniors': Baby Boomers are never getting old," she says. The challenge is to reposition your service, to redefine the notion of aging. For example, says Silver, with a laugh, "I am never going to need physiotherapy, but I don't mind having a physical trainer."

What's important is "to meet the need, while acknowledging the want."

Back in Vancouver, Malone doesn't talk about aging in place, but about "progressive living." As in Santa Fe, the Canadian complex will offer condos for sale, but residents may also lease some assisted care units. Home health care will also be delivered to condo dwellers once they need it. Health care is of special interest to Malone and his team; Plum Living currently provides a wide range of home health care services for the LGBT community and its family and friends.

Malone knows his complex, designed to fit with a Vancouver style of architecture, is likely to house folks across a wide range of ages. One survey respondent was 75 but not yet retired, while another, who was 40, wanted to move in right away. This anticipated complex may be still in the planning stage, but Malone knows it is on the way. ■

Aging at home may be a goal of most Atlantic region seniors, but too often they are hanging on to houses they can't afford to repair. Still most aren't planning to move from their homes any time soon, according to a new 1,702-person survey that provides a clearer picture of that region's seniors' housing needs and their requirements over the next 20 years.

The Atlantic region has a higher proportion of seniors than other areas of the country, and the number of seniors is growing at a faster rate. At the same time, the region's average income for seniors is lower than the national average and more of its seniors live in rural areas.

This is the challenge uncovered by the Atlantic Seniors Housing Research Alliance, a five-year research project undertaken by a 37-member alliance of universities, seniors' organizations, housing developers, service providers and government departments. Along with their survey, the project has formed 16 focus groups, is preparing an online housing inventory and will host a conference on the issue in May 2009.

But for Mount Saint Vincent University's Donald Shiner, the survey's principal investigator, the conclusion is stark: "Seniors in Atlantic Canada are doing everything they can to age in place but are at risk of not being able to afford the very homes they treasure." Almost half the seniors surveyed spend more than 30 per cent of their household income on shelter. Even more say their homes are in need of major repairs, particularly to increase energy efficiency. The challenge, says Shiner, will be to use the research to help seniors age in place as they wish. ■

•• For more information and to learn more about Atlantic Research Alliance, go to www.dialogueplus.ca.



The El Centro clubhouse common room.