

Developers taking a fresh look at retirement communities

By Teresa Acosta

Special to the Mercury News

Retirement community developers in California are taking a hard look at traditional approaches to location, design and details as baby boomers reach retirement age.

"The adventuresome spirit of Californians sets this market apart from other markets like Iowa or South Florida," says age-wave guru Ken Dychtwald, a San Francisco author and gerontologist.

He says retirement housing has basically been a long-term experiment and Californians are shaking the test tubes.

"Our seniors have a youthful lifestyle," Dychtwald says. "They're 50 to 90, working out, taking courses, surfing the Net or writing their first book of poetry. It's just a matter of time before seniors in California will raise a powerful question for the companies who build retirement communities here: how to create a community that will meet the needs of all ages, not just seniors."

Current marketing for retirement communities isn't matching the expectations of seniors or their children, says Dychtwald.

"Until retirement communities start communicating a more youthful and contemporary lifestyle, they'll only appeal to a small percentage," he says. "Healthy seniors will generally choose to make a go of it in their own communities — barring a medical condition or disability — instead of aging in a place occupied by peers which, in time, becomes a place of illness, suffering and death."

For the past two years, Grace DiMaggio, a spry 91-year-old, has considered selling her downtown Palo Alto residence and moving to the senior retirement community where her brother-in-law and a few friends live. But she dreaded moving from her neighborhood and giving up much of her independence and privacy, so DiMaggio decided to stay in the home where she's lived since 1953.

"My brother-in-law always wants to return home; it's sad," says the retired seamstress. "I began worrying about my health and that got me thinking about moving. But now I'll just cross that bridge when I come to it."

Responding to Californians' interest in exercise, Houston-based developer Belmont Corp. is building a "Center for Life Enhancement" in each of its retirement communities. The health and fitness center includes exercise bikes, treadmills, circuit training and classes on flexibility, strength and balance. Each center is staffed with a licensed therapist.

Patricia Will, Belmont Corp.'s co-founder and chief executive, notes that the company builds in urban centers so residents aren't isolated from city life. The company currently has eight villages.

"The California market certainly challenged Belmont Corp.," says marketing director Jeff DeBevec. "California culture has helped us to refine our programs and disseminate those changes across the country."

However, Tom Renn, regional director of sales for Sunrise Assisted Living, says the California market hasn't been that different from other locations for his company. Sunrise, headquartered in McLean, Va., has more than 220 homes open or under construction in the United States.

"We do have more aging boomers visiting our community," Renn says. "Boomers are generally more into planning their retirement. They often say they're just checking things out or they're looking at places for their parents."

Barry Johnson, senior direc-

tor of sales for Classic Residence by Hyatt at Palo Alto, agrees that California has not been distinctly different from other urban markets. The Palo Alto continuing care residence is scheduled to open in January 2005.

However, Hyatt's research in Palo Alto found that seniors

wanted much larger apartments than traditionally offered. So seven of the 388 apartments are 4,212 square feet — a first for Hyatt. Six of the seven are already sold.

Hyatt, an affiliate of Hyatt Corp., owns and operates 18 upscale retirement communities across the country.

NEW RESIDENCES

Two national companies are opening new senior communities soon in the Silicon Valley.

Belmont Village in Sunnyvale has a grand opening celebration noon to 4 p.m. today and Sunday at 1039 E. El Camino Real. The 100,000-square-foot community will have 136 units and 22 units with dementia support. For information, call (408) 720-8498 or visit

www.belmontvillage.com.

Sunrise of Belmont, which has models open, will welcome its first residents Oct. 14 at 1010 Alameda De Las Pulgas. The residence will have 49 rooms and 26 dementia support units. For information on Sunrise Assisted Living, call (650) 508-0400 or go on the Web at

www.sunrise-al.com.

Source: Belmont Corp. and Sunrise Assisted Living