

Doby Fleeman: Sustainable demographics: challenge and opportunity for the Davis economy



By Doby Fleeman

From page A11 | October 26, 2014 |

I read with interest the recent Davis Enterprise coverage of Assemblywoman Mariko Yamada and her cautionary observations regarding the rising tide of senior citizens in the Yolo County region. Referring to the “silver tsunami,” the article identifies many of challenges facing our growing senior population.

Quoting Yolo County Supervisor Jim Provenza: “Problems are only opportunities in work clothes,” and the next step “is to begin working on these problems.”

How true.

In addition raising funds to help augment underfunded social services, we see the senior community evolving new models of support with opportunities to establish new friendships, share skills, and arrange transportation, household and other services that make it easier to live independently in their communities of choice. These are some of the many opportunities that accompany such changes.

By virtue of the university and our large number of residents who have devoted their careers to public service and planned accordingly for their retirement, Davis may not face the sheer numbers of those requiring special assistance, but inevitably, there will be a growing need to support such programs both in and around the community.

These needs will result in new pressures for new programs, and for which the funding has not been identified. And therein lies the challenge: How do we plan to generate the funding to support this new demand for growth in services — on top of everything else now before us?

This week, I chose the issue of demographic trends because they have very real planning and fiscal implications for our community. And, likewise, they once again help to emphasize the unique opportunities available in Davis to address this approaching wave.

As a population ages — not unlike our roads, our pools, our schools and our parks — we are requiring more care and more expensive maintenance. And, at the same time, many of us are spending less, hoping to reduce expenses and thereby extend our financial resources during retirement. This natural tendency to downsize purchasing, together with a growing preference for “aging in place,” tend to result in both reduced per-capita spending and reduced property tax generation.

In other words, what works well at an individual level in terms of savings doesn't translate too well when it comes to generating new revenues to support our increasingly expensive municipal service requirements. I broach these issues, because it seems only a matter of time until our City Council presents its latest budget and we begin the long-overdue discussion of our best options to fund reinvestment in our community infrastructure.

What, then, are our best options and opportunities for working our way out of this imbalance?

At the other end of the aging spectrum, our community enjoys a continuing expansion of college-age students. Unlike the population of more permanent residents, this demographic does not “age” over time. Rather, it is perpetually replaced with each new class of students.

This critically important and vibrant segment currently represents about a third of our resident population. It is also important to recognize that this population is traditionally regarded as having more limited spending power and is least able to afford additional new financial burdens as the community grapples with how to pay for its increasing cost of municipal services.

By the same token, this same group of young college students represents an incredible pool of talent for our next-generation economy. One of the younger generation's greatest challenges is finding a suitable place to work. While we have some amazing and exciting

examples of new startup companies, they're certainly not for everyone. For the vast majority of graduates, Davis offers few viable career opportunities. It strikes me as such a missed opportunity, and yet, it is something within our power to address.

This juxtaposition between the generations seems the perfect opportunity for a constructive pivot to the next economy — growing important new jobs, while reinforcing our local economy.

As we consider options for the future direction of the community, I would encourage young and old alike to thoughtfully consider — and preferably engage in — the conversation around the economic and social ties that unite our generations to help ensure a healthy, prosperous and sustainable future for all.

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