



the. aging city

LONDON—DEMOGRAPHICALLY speaking—is an aging city. Over the past decade our overall population increased by less than 10 per cent, but the over-60 crowd increased by 22 per cent. Luckily, at least for the people who plan to live here into their senior years, London appears to be a pretty darn good city to grow old in. In fact, at the end of June the World Health Organization (WHO) declared London the first age-friendly city in Canada.

What exactly does that mean for our town? Will it affect the way the city is viewed, for better or for worse? Will it change the way our community grows and develops in the future? "Aging is inevitable. We will all be affected by it at some point," reasons Gina Barber, the city controller who spearheaded London's efforts to be included on WHO's list of age-friendly cities. Far from a local issue, demographic aging is a global phenomenon. According to the United Nations Populations Division, there are more elderly people than children in the developed

City controller Gina Barber



The World Health Organization has crowned London the first age-friendly city in Canada. But can we handle legions of retiring boomers? And, more to the point, do we want to? BY KYM WOLFE

world, due to the double-whammy of declining birthrates and mortality rates.

While some people automatically envision higher demand for health care, home supports and other services, others see today's seniors as vital, active and contributing to the communities they live in. The WHO initiative tries to emphasize the positive contributions seniors make to society and to recognize cities that support active and healthy aging.

In judging a city's age-friendly merits, WHO considers eight key elements: public

spaces; transportation; housing; social inclusion; social participation; civic participation and employment; communication and information; and community support and health services. The job of London's Age Friendly City Working Group, chaired by Barber, was to determine how well the city is doing in each area and to steer a path for reaching age-friendly benchmarks in the future. "The wonderful thing is that all of the elements that are identified by WHO as important to seniors are also important to improving quality of life for the

whole community," Barber says.

WHO's list includes things like well maintained green spaces, outdoor seating and walking paths; good street lighting, police patrols and community education to improve outdoor safety; reliable public transportation; affordable and well-constructed housing; accessible venues for events and a wide variety of activities and affordable attractions; consistent outreach to include people at risk of social isolation; flexible options for volunteering and paid work; effective communication systems and public access to computers and the Internet at no or minimal charge; and an adequate range of health and community support services.

As Barber observes, who wouldn't want to live in a city that boasts those kind of features? Age-friendly equals people-friendly," she reasons.

Of course, the question naturally arises, What about the associated costs? Can we afford to pay for all of the services and fea-



tures WHO is recommending? "It's a perspective that you bring to the budgeting process, using a lens of age-friendly in how we do things and what we make a priority," says Barber. She points out that city council unanimously endorsed London's application to WHO, and both Mayor Anne Marie Decicco-Best and chief administrative officer Jeff Fielding wrote letters of support. "It is essential to have both the political and administrative will," says Barber.

On the flip side, Barber says seniors are enriching the city. Many moving here in retirement bring financial resources. They are consuming goods and services, and as audience members are supporting the city's creative arts. They are well informed and interested in politics and are making their voices heard at the municipal level. And they have time to get involved as volunteers. "Many organizations simply could

not do all that they do without seniors who volunteer there, from hospitals, arts and political organizations to Meals-on-Wheels, churches and organizations that provide outreach and work with the disadvantaged," she says.

As for the impact this will have on business in the city, Gerry Macartney, CEO and general manager of the London Chamber of Commerce, refers to London's age-friendly designation as "another arrow in our quiver of economic development tools.

"But it's not a stand-alone tool," he cautions. "If you are going to be a leading Canadian city you want to be attractive to seniors. We don't want the reputation of being the retirement capital of North America, but added to the recipe it enriches what London has to offer."

Peter White, president and CEO of the London Economic Development

Corporation, echoes Macartney's views, citing this as another opportunity for our city to raise its profile locally, nationally and internationally as a community to invest, play and live in. And by virtue of being age-friendly, he says London is attracting specific kinds of business investment.

"We see a lot of new retirement communities being built, which has supported the construction industry for many years," White observes. "For example, Amica was opened last year. It was a \$44-million investment, created 60 new jobs and kept the construction industry building for two years," says White. "We are currently in discussion with a company that is making a new product for paraplegics and quadriplegics. They are looking at London because of the expertise we have in aging and geriatric care."

When companies are weighing where to

set up shop, they usually have a laundry list of things they are looking for, says White, and a trained and available workforce is usually at or near the top of the list. "We want to educate employers about the value that older workers can add to their company," he says. "Businesses can utilize their skills and knowledge to train and mentor younger employees."

In many ways, London was on the leading edge of being age-friendly long before it was recognized by WHO. We have been home to the Canadian Centre for Activity and Aging since 1989, and in 2005 we were the first Canadian city to launch a resource kit specifically focused on older workers—the LEDC's Experience Works package, a resource that promotes the value of older workers to employers and provides tools to help seniors either stay on the job longer or re-enter the workforce. Also, in 2005, when Warren Bland released his book *Retire in Style, 60 Outstanding Places Across the USA and Canada*, London ranked second highest on the list.

The final report of the Age Friendly City Working Group sums up the impact of being an age friendly city in this way: "The benefits of being an age-friendly city extend far beyond the senior population. Smooth, well-maintained sidewalks encourage walking by old and young alike as well as persons with disabilities and parents with strollers. Women and children have greater freedom in safe, secure neighbourhoods. Consistent high-quality care for those who require it at all ages reduces stress for family caregivers. The employment and volunteer services provided by and to an aging population unites and benefits the whole community. The patronage of business and the arts benefits a whole economy. By being friendly to seniors, we are being friendly to persons of all ages."