

Building an Age-Friendly Simcoe County

2016 Community Needs Assessment

A stylized illustration featuring a large tree with heart-shaped leaves on the left, a yellow sun on the right, and a row of colorful buildings (yellow, orange, and red) in the center. The background is a solid green color.

Executive Summary

Released May 2017
simcoe.ca/age-friendly

Acknowledgments

The County of Simcoe wishes to acknowledge and thank the following:

“A society for all ages is multigenerational. It is not fragmented, with youths, adults and older persons going their separate ways. Rather it is age-inclusive, with different generations recognizing—and acting upon—their commonality of interest.”

UN Secretary
General Kofi Annan,
October 1998

The Ontario Seniors' Secretariat for funding Simcoe County's Age-Friendly Community Planning Initiative.

Staff and students of the Georgian College Research Analyst Program for their outstanding work in developing the *2016 An Age-Friendly Simcoe County Community Survey* and compiling data results in Age-Friendly Community Posters for each municipality.

Members of the Age-Friendly Project Steering Committee, our public libraries and library co-operative, the Simcoe County Accessibility Group, our local municipalities and municipal leaders, and all other stakeholders who participated in our engagement strategies and supported this initiative with your energy, enthusiasm and invaluable input.

Kevin Beaulieu and his team from Public Interest Strategies Communications for expertly facilitating the community engagement process and compiling the *2016 Simcoe County Age-Friendly Community Needs Assessment Report* for the County of Simcoe.

We extend deep appreciation to the older adults who shared their time and insights with us. Your generous contributions are what has made this assessment so successful.

Foreward

It is not news to Canadian and International communities that the population is aging. As baby boomers (born between roughly 1946 and 1964) age and subsequent generations have generally smaller families, the proportion of our population made up by older adults is increasing. The World Health Organization (WHO) projects that the proportion of the global population aged 60 will double from 11% in 2006 to 22% by 2050. This shift has prompted policy makers around the world to ask the question: how do we create communities that are more inclusive and accessible to people as they age?

Many issues affecting older adults are in fact issues that affect everyone, but they may be more pronounced or experienced differently by seniors. The benefits of planning age-friendly communities extend to everyone, regardless of their current age. People of all ages will benefit from “aging into” a more accessible and supportive environment, and may have family members who benefit »

**Aged 60
will double
11%-22%**
from
2006 - 2050





in the meantime. Supporting older adults in their wish for independent living may also help reduce strain on health-care and hospital systems in the long term.

Simcoe County residents are also living longer, healthier lives. To prepare for this demographic change and to accommodate growth in the number of older residents, the County is preparing a positive aging strategy combined with a planning framework that will help community stakeholders identify, plan for, and address the needs and priorities of older adults. Our research is enhanced by following the

Finding the Right Fit: Age-Friendly Community Planning Guide issued by the government of Ontario, which is based on the WHO eight dimensions central to creating an Age-Friendly Community:

- transportation
- communication / information
- housing
- community support/ health services
- outdoor spaces/buildings
- civic participation/employment
- social participation
- respect/social inclusion

Background

In 2015 the County received funding from the government of Ontario's Age-Friendly Community Planning Grant Program to better support and bolster the active aging of its older population. **The program helps governments and community organizations to develop local plans that will address aging demographics and enable people of all ages to fully participate in community life. Assessing the needs of the County's aging population is necessary to plan and implement change.**

This report compiles and synthesizes the common themes from all project activities, reflecting Simcoe County's seniors' experiences through the WHO's identified eight dimensions. The analysis of the collected data from the needs assessment highlights issues that require attention in order for the County to meet its objectives. The goal of the analysis and subsequent future considerations is to help the County create guiding principles in developing a seniors' strategy and age-



friendly community framework. The seniors' strategy, combined with the planning framework, will be submitted for endorsement by County Council in the autumn of 2017 for consideration in future strategic planning. Participation from all stakeholders, including local residents, service users and providers, professionals, volunteers, and community organizations is essential in ensuring the viability of any future plans.

The City of Barrie, Town of Wasaga Beach, and Township of Oro-Medonte received separate funding from the Government of Ontario. We are pleased to collaborate with these municipalities and thank them for their support.

Age-Friendly Simcoe County

In 2012, in Simcoe County, 40% were seniors on social housing wait list and the average time on wait list for social housing is 3-6 years.



Simcoe County is experiencing rapid aging above national and provincial averages. The proportion of adults aged 65 and over in Simcoe County is 15.7% of the population compared to 14.6% in Ontario and 14.8% in Canada. Currently, 31% of Simcoe County's population is 55 and older.¹ By 2041, that population is expected to increase to 41%.²

In 2012, of those currently on the County of Simcoe's social housing wait list, 40% were seniors. The average time an applicant remains on the wait list is three to six years. The growth of racialized population in Simcoe County increased from 3.05% of

the population in 2001 to 4.65% in 2011 or from 11,365 to 20,390.

Rural vs. Urban Considerations

Simcoe County has a diverse geographical profile, with large urban centres, medium and small municipalities, and many residents in small centres and rural settings such as farming communities. The needs of older adults may be fairly consistent, but their access to resources and services may vary depending on their location. For example, whereas sidewalk-clearing may be a priority in urban centres, rural areas may not have sidewalks to clear, so electronic

¹ Statistics Canada (2011)

² Simcoe Muskoka's Vital Signs (2016) – A Community of Support

| Age-Friendly Simcoe County

access, road clearing, or visits from service providers may be a higher priority.

These varying needs came up often through the discussions informing this report and should be given consideration in future planning. The County plays a central leadership role in supporting rural communities and local municipalities, and should identify areas of shared opportunity. Seniors living in rural communities may be at higher risk of isolation and lack of social inclusion and participation. Close-to-home recreation, community support care, and health services are often less available.



The needs of older adults may be fairly consistent, but their access to resources and services may vary depending on their location.

Social and environmental challenges identified through this process specific to rural communities include, but are not limited to:

- Lack of available services/ supports
- Limited housing and transportation accessibility options
- Travel required for many health services
- Limited financial resources
- Social isolation



Approach

The Age-Friendly Community Project was carefully constructed to maximize older adults' input and perspectives. The County engaged public interest from April 2016 to March 2017 to conduct a thorough needs assessment, identify age-friendly priorities, and develop strategic actions for future considerations in support of establishing Simcoe County as an Age-Friendly Community.

Steering Committee

At the start of the project, a Steering Committee was established to provide guidance and community support. The Committee consisted of 31 community members who had diverse expertise and experience

working and living in Simcoe County. Their backgrounds ranged from government, planning, health and social services, education, accessibility to senior-serving and disability-related organizations, local seniors, and business representatives.

The Steering Committee had the opportunity for input on all components of the project, and supported project activities through their own community connections and increased public awareness. Members were kept informed of project updates through monthly meetings, newsletters, and invites to various project events.



Project Activities

The needs assessment required four main public engagement strategies. These activities included:

1. **A Comprehensive public survey**
2. **Key informant interviews**
3. **Focus groups**
4. **Public consultations**

The activities were also constructed to inform the public via press releases, website, and newsletters during each stage of the project. Data from the four primary sources were analyzed to generate a baseline understanding of the County as a community.

Survey

A survey was developed in partnership with the Georgian College Research Analyst Program to collect information from residents 60 years of age and older, caregivers, and service providers of older adults. The survey was designed to gather future considerations and areas

of concern for older adults across Simcoe County's 16 municipalities (three designated francophone areas), two separated cities, and two first nations.

Through the support of the County, the survey was released in March 2016, and received overwhelming response from residents. A total of 3,048 surveys were completed, 2,077 (68%) of which were online. 92% of respondents reported being over the age of 55, and 77% were over the age of 65. Nearly half of the participants (44%) were between 65 and 75 years old. Respondents reported a mix of income and housing types. Women were more likely to respond to the survey than men, as 69% of survey respondents were female and 31% were male. The reported annual household/family income of survey respondents had a median range of \$40,000 - \$49,999. Participants were distributed fairly evenly across the different townships, ensuring involvement from all of Simcoe County.»

| Project Activities

The high response rate indicated a keen interest from older adults in both identifying and addressing the structural inequities that prevent them from living full lives. It also lent credibility to the accuracy of the responses.

Key Informant Interviews

The survey results informed the development of key informant questions.

A total of 12 one-on-one interviews were conducted with community members who were knowledgeable about issues and priorities in the County during the months of April and May 2016. Interviews typically lasted an hour. The information gathered from the interviews was summarized and analyzed.

Focus Groups

Sixteen categorized focus groups were hosted throughout Simcoe County with participants from all 16 local municipalities. The focus groups lasted approximately two hours long and were voice recorded for accurate transcription purposes. Notes were also taken for

reference. The transcriptions and notes were then reviewed and analyzed. In total, 125 participants participated in the focus groups held in June to July 2016.

Specialized focus groups were hosted to ensure participation from the following populations: caregivers, service providers, Francophones, newcomers, indigenous communities living on and off-reserve, and senior-living communities. Outreach methods for the focus groups included libraries, bulletin boards, word-of-mouth, community organizations and agencies, community and recreation, seniors' housing, and service clubs. Steering Committee members also supported outreach efforts through their community contacts and networks.

Community Public Consultations

More than 120 people attended the two-hour long public consultations held in Alliston, Collingwood, Orillia, and Penetanguishene. At each location, two consultations were held per day, one in

| Project Activities

the afternoon and one in the evening. The public consultation meeting notices were advertised through local newspapers and radio stations, published on the County of Simcoe website, and promoted through municipal offices, agencies, and individuals already involved in earlier project activities.

Comment cards were widely distributed and participants were encouraged to share their perspectives on the eight dimensions. The comment cards were also made available on the County's website in order for more people to provide feedback and input.



Simcoe County considered a positive place for older adults



Overall, the research indicates that older adults consider Simcoe County a positive place for aging adults to live. Respondents often describe the County as friendly, quiet, and a tight-knit community. Older adults enjoy the small town environment; they value the sense of safety and social rapport that comes from living among people who share a common sense of community. A number of respondents indicated that they had either moved to the County to retire or were originally from the area and had moved back. Other attributes they highlighted included local trails and the vast amount of green spaces.

In general, older adults feel respected, included, and

that their contributions are adequately recognized. A range of volunteer and intergenerational opportunities exist in the County, in addition to opportunities to participate in spiritual and community life.

Respondents expressed overwhelming appreciation for local libraries, seniors clubs and recreation, and community that provide a variety of activities and programs.

Despite the general feedback that Simcoe County is a positive and supportive home for older adults, the research highlighted certain areas of improvement in reducing barriers to age-friendliness that significantly affect seniors' lives.



Predominant Themes

The eight dimensions simultaneously are independently important and interconnected. The main overarching themes highlighted as being particularly significant through the needs assessment process are:

1. Transportation
2. Communication/Information
3. Affordability
4. Accessibility

Transportation

A majority of participants agreed that Simcoe County could expand the reach and improve the efficiency of the public transportation throughout the region. Transportation also impacts the seven other dimensions of livability.

Transportation was a dominant issue in most other themes discussed in our research. The majority of participants agreed significant barriers exist to mobility, and that the County could do more when it comes to helping them be more mobile.

There is a strong need for efficient public transportation within the County and between

the County and its neighboring communities. Staying involved in the community also requires the means and ability to get out and about. When the option of driving is no longer physically or financially viable, alternative forms of transportation must be available.

Communication and Information

Throughout the assessment, participants named the lack of communication and information sharing of community services, events, and opportunities as a consistent impediment to their lives; they would like to know what is available for them in their communities and develop informed decisions on how they interact with their environment. Many of the participants, reported that they did not feel well-informed and did not feel included or connected. As a result, older adults report feeling anxious, stressed, and frustrated. »



“Each year the cost of living will go up at a higher rate than my income, and government cutbacks on medical care will deteriorate my access to adequate health/prescription services.”



Affordability

Affordability is a critical issue for older adults throughout the eight dimensions. Rent and home utility payments are generally among the highest monthly household expenses for many older adults who are living on reduced or fixed-incomes. Without adequate government financial support, in-home-care supports and health care services are expensive. In order to afford the increasing costs of housing-related expenses, many people are forced to cut back on other necessities, such as transportation, medical care, food, and social activities. Health-care expenses not supported by the government, such as dental care, prescriptions, hearing aids, and glasses, are also expensive. Lack of transportation, compounded by the costs associated with social and civic participation, socially isolates older adults.

| Predominant Themes

While there is an increasing amount of information available on the internet, seniors sometimes cannot access this information because they cannot afford to purchase a computer or internet service. For older adults who do not have adequate public transportation in their community, alternative means of transportation, such as taxis or community transportation services, can be extremely expensive.

Affordable housing options

The availability, choice and cost of housing for older adults as they age is tremendously important. Participants said that in communities where there is currently a range of independent and assisted housing options, most experience shortages

in some of these options. Throughout the consultation process, one of the biggest concerns raised was the critical need for more accessible/affordable housing options for older people.

Lack of transportation, compounded by the costs associated with social and civic participation, socially isolates older adults.





“The problem is that as soon as a small section of the sidewalk is compromised because of the new construction throughout town, those routes are rendered inaccessible. It is extremely important for them to remain accessible as someone in a wheelchair cannot go on grass or any unlevelled or softer surface for their safety. ”

Accessibility

Walkability and public access to transportation, with a particular focus on bus stops, sidewalk maintenance, and snow removal, all pose as barriers to mobility if accessibility is not considered. Increasing accessible and affordable housing alternatives and raising awareness about accessibility in public buildings are crucial to ensuring older adults can remain in their communities longer. Considering accessibility for public events and other community activities encourages social and civic participation.

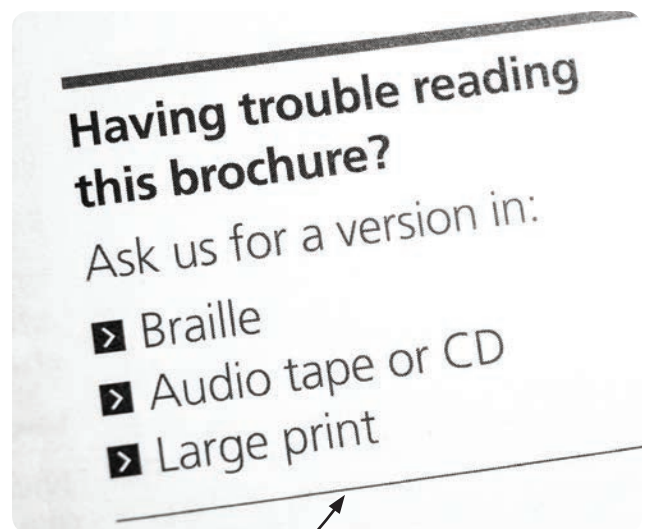
| Predominant Themes



Without adapted washrooms, a ramp to enter the building, accessible seating, and prior knowledge of an event, many seniors and others requiring access are excluded from social events.

Employers also need to consider workers' needs by providing training opportunities and considering accessibility; they can prolong employment for those in need of access, including older adults.

Information should also be available in diverse formats, font size and medium, so older adults, regardless of ability, can access and understand it.



Priorities and Future Considerations

“It’s about time the rural communities get some transportation for the elderly that are not able to go to town and do the shopping meeting with old friends!”

“Because we live on a farm in the country, I do wonder how we are going to manage when neither of us can drive.”

“I have concern that I would have to live elsewhere if I could no longer drive. It is very important to me to be able to continue to be among my friends.”

Transportation

- Increase accessible parking spaces near buildings
- Increase reliability and frequency of public transportation
- Improve accessibility to bus stops and taxis
- Make transportation schedules accessible and easy to understand
- Improve public transportation options in and around the County



| Priorities and Future Considerations

Communication and Information

- Improve the communication of information of services, programs and events in the community
- Increase the co-ordination of information and services among service agencies
- Increase access to computer literacy training



When you don't know
where to turn.

2-1-1 Telephone Help Line

2-1-1 is an information and referral service that connects people to a full range of non-emergency community and social services, government, and health services. This service is free for users and available 24/7 in 150 languages via telephone interpretation service. It can also be accessed on the internet. According to survey results:

59% of respondents don't know about 2-1-1

| Priorities and Future Considerations

"I am now getting ready to put my two-bedroom house up for sale because it is too expensive for me to live here anymore. I am in debt putting new roofs, new furnaces, new appliances, and a new deck after the last one fell off the side of my house. I have had a depression/anxiety disorder for two years now and its partly because I know I have to move and can't maintain this house on my income. It is an unknown future that awaits me."

Housing

- Develop more affordable housing to address waitlists
- More diverse housing options
- Improve awareness of housing options for older adults
- More age-friendly housing developments with accessible amenities





Community Supports and Health Services

Existing services along the continuum of care for older people, such as preventive care, specialist clinics, hospitals, adult day care opportunities, respite care, rehabilitation, residential and nursing care, home care and palliative care, health education around fall prevention, and home safety were applauded by many. At the same time, many participants are dissatisfied with the current health services in their community, citing challenges accessing health-care professionals such as family and geriatric physicians and senior specific health services in the County.»

“There is very little help for people requiring transportation while in a wheelchair for doctor and hospital appointments, and if you do find a ride, it can cost a fortune; for example \$350-400 to Southlake hospital in Newmarket or \$175 for Alliston hospital to your home in Beeton. The joys of living in rural Simcoe County.”

Community Supports and Health Services cont'd

"It is very difficult to obtain help. I am a man looking after my wife who has Alzheimers and CCAC wants me to manage at home. With very little help, if any, the cost of home supplies, such as a toilet extension is expensive when you are surviving on CPP and Old Age Pension."

- Improve and expand health- care services in the County
- Improve communication of regarding existing health services
- Health services and community supports need to be better co-ordinated
- Enhance transportation services to get to medical appointments

Outdoor Spaces

The County was described as a very clean, beautiful, and safe place to live. A large number of older adults spoke with enthusiasm, about the variety and quality of parks and trails available throughout the County, and indicated their satisfaction and appreciation for the green spaces.



Outdoor Spaces & Buildings

- Improve overall accessibility of public and private buildings
- Improve sidewalk safety
- Increase access to public washrooms in the community
- Install more seating in the community to allow for greater social participation
- Improve pedestrian safety



Civic Participation and Employment

- Improve access to information of where to look for employment and volunteer opportunities
- Create awareness with local businesses about the value of hiring older workers
- Provide more opportunities for intergenerational opportunities

Volunteering

There is a positive link between volunteerism and mental and physical health. The general attitude of older adults is that volunteering keeps them healthy and active. Factors that facilitate them engaging in volunteer work and civic opportunities include having available time and aligned interests, being physically capable of actively participating, knowing where to access these opportunities, and transportation to get to and from the locations. Older adults appreciated flexibility of being able to volunteer at times that are convenient for them.

“Maybe for volunteer hours a student could be partnered with a senior that would teach them how to knit, sew or some other skill that the senior has. Maybe a student could do a project about genealogy where they are partnered with a senior who tells them about what their life was about and the history of the area. Let the senior LIVE.”

| Priorities and Future Considerations



Social Participation

Participants praised seniors' social clubs and church organizations for providing opportunities for people to connect. Others pointed out that, in the absence of a local community or recreation centre, many participants travel outside of their community to participate in social activities. Many of the cultural activities and entertainment are limited or lacking in the smaller townships. Without a car, older adults rely on friends, neighbours or family members to drive them to enjoy social activities.

- Ensure spaces where programs and services are held are accessible
- Provide information about activities and events, including details about accessibility of facilities and transportation options
- Find ways to encourage a variety of people to come out to social events and activities—including those on fixed incomes, less mobile, and who live alone

People want to see more activities run from schools or other community facilities to accommodate more programs and services.

Participants also suggested enhancing access to social events in other communities by offering day trips once or twice a month.

Other barriers mentioned were the accessibility of venues and facilities, lack of inclusiveness, inappropriate programs and services, inconvenient time and location of events and not feeling comfortable driving at night.

Participants who do not have financial security were concerned about not being able to afford the programs they need and want to participate in.

| Priorities and Future Considerations

Respect and Social Inclusion

In general, older adults in Simcoe County are treated with respect. Participants expressed appreciation for their neighbours, many whom are also older adults, noting that overall, people are helpful, courteous, and kind.

- Increase the involvement of older adults in community consultation and decision-making process
- Encourage and celebrate the inclusion of older adults in the community
- Develop outreach systems where people check-in on one another when someone is living alone, has mental health, or mobility issues
- Extend personal invitations to people who are socially isolated
- Increase Intergenerational Programming

“High school kids getting their volunteer hours by reading and helping out the aging population how to get connected with social media! Just the interaction with old and young would be so wonderful! Older people are the most undervalued!”

Intergenerational engagement

Respondents noted that there has been a decline in interaction between generations in recent years, leading to possible misconceptions and misunderstandings about aging.

It was also suggested positive stories about families and communities helping each other need to be told and highlighted.



Next Steps



Part of the age-friendly process is to incorporate multi-factorial recommendations in our Age-friendly plan that align with all core business areas of the County. Over the next few months, stakeholder meetings will be set up with key representatives to analyze the report findings and identify items that should be included in the County's seniors' strategy and planning framework.

Another aspect of the AFC process is to introduce indicators or measures that will help us identify progress in becoming more age-friendly and can be used to produce Profile/Progress

reports and increase awareness about age-friendly activities undertaken within the County.

The Age-Friendly Project Steering Committee will evaluate the Committee's Terms of Reference to include the next steps of the County of Simcoe's Age Friendly Communities Initiative planning by remaining in place beyond the project term to oversee the initial roll out of the Simcoe County seniors' strategy and planning framework.

In addition, as recommended by the AFC Steering Committee a Communications Campaign has been developed to propagate »

| Next Steps

awareness of the Simcoe County Age-Friendly Communities movement.

Finally, the *2016 Simcoe County Age-Friendly Community Needs Assessment Report* findings and any additional considerations from core business areas and stakeholders will be used to create the *Simcoe County Positive Aging Strategy: Older Adults Strengthening Our Communities*.

This will include a detailed planning framework to support regional and municipal governments in building and strengthening age-friendly communities.

The full report entitled *2016 Simcoe County Age-Friendly Community Needs Assessment* can be found by visiting the age-friendly website at:

www.simcoe.ca/age-friendly



Moving Forward

The County of Simcoe commissioned this community needs assessment study to have a better understanding of seniors' priorities in Simcoe County to help anticipate needs and adopt as part of their future strategic planning.

The findings and recommendations summarized above and fully detailed in the *2016 Simcoe County Age-Friendly Community Needs Assessment Report* (full report) provide a strong and sound basis for the County to go forward in the development of the *Positive Aging Strategy: Older Adults Strengthening Our Communities* to be released in the Fall 2017.

While needs are increasing and becoming more complex, resources are diminishing and the political and institutional landscape in many ways limits efficiency and effectiveness. This will require new and innovative ways to function and allocate resources, as well as foster collaboration for meeting these needs.

"An age-friendly community is one where policies, services and structures related to the physical and social environments are designed to support and enable older people to live in a secure environment, enjoy good health and continue to participate fully in their communities."³



3 Global Age-friendly Cities: A Guide, 2007, World Health Organization



There is an opportunity for the County of Simcoe to play a more central leadership role in

- ✓ Providing information about the senior population and community services
- ✓ Bringing together communities of interest and establishing collaborations among organizations
- ✓ Submitting innovative ideas and stimulating others to share their ideas for all to consider
- ✓ Putting in place an Age-Friendly Communication Campaign
- ✓ Incorporating AFC concepts in all core business areas of the County
- ✓ Enabling lower-tier municipalities to adopt AFC options where possible
- ✓ Encouraging local businesses to become more age-friendly

Age-Friendly Project Steering Committee

We would like to extend a special note of thanks and acknowledgement to the following individuals for their membership on the Simcoe County Age Friendly Community Steering Committee.



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