

Boomers force municipalities to alter their game

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You've probably heard how 50 is the new 30.

Well, it might well be that the new 50, or even 55, is now somewhere near 70 years of age.

Long gone is an expectation that adults must slow down and curtail activities when 55 candles need be extinguished on a birthday cake. Just because that was the case a couple generations ago doesn't make it so now.

The rules of play are changing as baby boomers age. Folks may be getting older, but they still like their fun and games, and want to be active more than any previous generation. This a significant power-wielding group that often gets what it demands.

In short, the generation that created old-timers and masters sports is getting older. And the over-55s are an extremely large and growing group.

It is not only fitting, but obligatory, that municipalities listen and react to those demands.

"We are very aware of a growing senior and older adult population," says Mary Creighton, director of recreational services for the past seven years for the City of Markham. "One thing we knew we had to do was have an older athlete policy and we're doing that right now. It's how we need to move forward and how to deal with an aging population."

Recreation directors in municipalities across the region meet quarterly to exchange ideas regarding trends in activities and needs. It should be no surprise that older adults' needs are high on the list of priorities.



Creighton points to an integrated leisure services master plan unveiled in 2010, which included sensitivity and sensibility toward a rapidly aging population.

That strategy works in sync with the Region of York's strategies for seniors' needs and issues, including housing and transit. Markham's five senior adults clubs have approximately 4,800 members. And many more figure to be on the way.

"We know we have to get ready for growth in that age group and one strategy is becoming an age-friendly community," said Creighton.

Markham's facilities are fully accessible. Programming includes an extreme range of activities from cards and crafts to more physically demanding

sports such as volleyball, she said.

Sometimes it is as simple as redesigning playing surfaces with lines corresponding to the introduction of new activities.

For instance, the Aariin Community Centre and Library, due to open in Markham this fall, will include lines for pickleball on its court surfaces, in addition to traditional court sport lines.

In Newmarket and Georgina, at least one set of two tennis courts in each municipality have been reconfigured into pickleball courts.

The racquet sport combines elements of tennis, badminton and table tennis, but is played on a smaller surface and a lower net.

"Pickleball is a growing sport and one of the fastest



Steve Somerville/Metroland

(Clockwise from top) An overview of popular pickleball action at the Pan Am Centre in Markham; Ellanna Whitaker of Newmarket and her pickleball partner, Holly Walker of Markham, both lunge for a ball hit over the net at the Pan Am Centre in Markham; Connie Green reacts to her bowl missing the jack. Watching are Keswick Club 55 carpet bowling competitors Elsie Harrington (from left to right), Joe Smyth, Rocco Di Mambro, Carol Klahm and Ren Gazley.

growing in North America," said Newmarket director of recreation and culture, Colin Service, noting the conversion in 2016 of two tennis courts into six pickleball courts. "We had a demand to provide a facility and this facility was the right size for six pickleball courts.

"It was the perfect storm of several factors coming together. There is nothing on the books right now, but we are always ready to adapt (to demand)."

Service points out the municipality is not simply acting impulsively, but based on needs gathered through interaction with citizens. It doesn't always mean bringing into action bulldozers and moving the earth.

It's noteworthy that municipalities' activities maga-

zine unfailingly include a section dedicated to activities for older athletes.

"For our recreation playbook we did a lot of research and consultation," said Service. "As baby boomers age, they don't always want program-specific facilities as much as something to do that is age-specific.

"We have added a lot of group fitness classes, so it's less about hard impact classes and toward full body and core conditioning. Stuff that is a lot easier on the joints."

Georgina has been an avid booster of sports for seniors and has hosted Seniors Games events regularly since 1995.

Georgina has seniors centres, or Club 55 facilities, in Keswick, Sutton and Pefferlaw. Additionally, a pro-

posed multi-use recreation facility in the south end of Keswick will be designed with seniors' needs in mind.

"Georgina has one of the highest rates of seniors' participation," said director of recreation and culture Robin McDougall. "We are responding to this very active group. It's now a more active group than ever and we have to be more creative to meet their needs.

The regular standbys such as cards, billiards and darts are sharing the spotlight with carpet bowling, shuffleboard and yoga, among other activities.

"It's definitely a more active (age group) than even 15 years ago," said McDougall. "It's a younger senior that wants to be more active."

The message is plain and simple: Play on!

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