

Local Officials Ride the Wave of Baby Boomers

Community Analyst helps make Placer County more friendly to retirees

by Karen Richardson, Esri Writer

What do Cher, Steven Spielberg, George W. Bush, and nearly 3 million other Americans have in common?

They are members of the baby boom generation who are turning 65 this year at the rate of 7,000 per day.

Baby boomers were born during the surge in population that followed World War II. They grew up during an era of dramatic social change that saw the Vietnam War, Woodstock, and the landing of a man on the moon. Their numbers have caused a demographic bulge that has redefined society as it passes through each phase of life.

Analysts are finding that the aging baby boom generation is now causing demographics in certain areas of the United States to change rapidly. One such area is Placer County, California's second-fastest growing county during the past two decades. Stretching more than 100 miles from metropolitan Sacramento east through the Sierra Nevada mountains to Lake Tahoe and the Nevada border, Placer County draws younger professionals and retirees alike to its mix of pleasant suburbs, small towns, foothills, and rugged mountains.

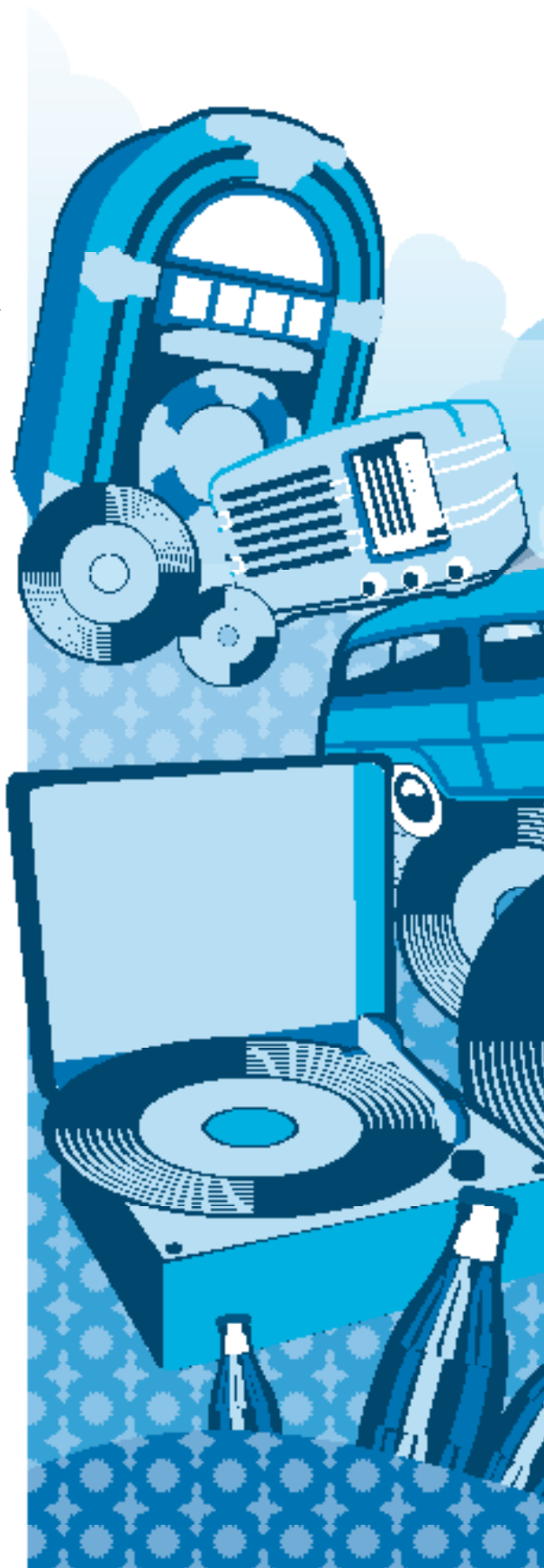
Like many communities, the area has grown organically. People were attracted by the relaxed pace of life and temperate climate. As a result, residents are scattered through the region. As its many baby boomers pass into retirement and live longer, Placer County's population profile is being transformed. Placer County wants to ensure a high quality of life for these aging residents by helping them continue living independently.

Online Source of Current Information

David Wiltsee, a retired urban and regional planner, is interested in understanding what this change means to the county's communities. Like many retirees, he keeps himself busy and currently serves as a local representative on a Placer County Municipal Advisory Council (MAC). Members appointed to MACs represent unincorporated areas of California counties and advise county government about these areas' activities and problems. They provide a link between citizens and government officials. Wiltsee's MAC includes a 51-square-mile ridge along Interstate 80 that Wiltsee has dubbed History Ridge, a reference to the area's role in western expansion, which includes gold mining, the first transcontinental railroad, and the first coast-to-coast highway (i.e., the Lincoln Highway).

Wiltsee has been busy assimilating information about the changes in Placer's demographics using Esri's Community Analyst. Understanding this information will help local government do more active planning. Wiltsee has a specific interest in ensuring that there are programs—like Meals on Wheels and various transportation programs—that care for the elderly. "We need to make our area retirement friendly," said Wiltsee. "I am finding information that will be useful to help the organizations that I volunteer for."

Esri Community Analyst is a web-based solution that provides analysis and mapping of thousands of demographic, health, economic, education, and business data variables. The solution is designed specifically for government agencies, policy makers, civic organizations, and non-governmental organizations (like the ones Wiltsee serves on). Community Analyst can analyze data in a geographic context such as a congressional district, block group, or census tract.



Wiltsee is no stranger to using and analyzing geographic data. He came from Georgia, where he was the director of research and information for the state Community Affairs Department as well as the liaison with several federal government agencies including the Census State Data Center and United States Geological Survey (USGS) National Mapping Program. Today, Wiltsee uses his expertise to provide a detailed view of the needs of the area as well as its terrain barriers. Using Community Analyst, he can analyze neighborhoods and subcounty areas to enable more informed and refined decisions. With this information, the appropriate personnel can be dispatched to provide needed support such as meals, busing, emergency services, or in-home support. Community Analyst is also proving useful in longer-range planning, such as senior housing, and in identifying gaps in key services and facilities, particularly as related to access to health care, recreation, and continuing education.

A Geographic View of the Landscape

Before Wiltsee began using Community Analyst, the best managers could do was take data from aggregated census geographies and try to figure out how to apply that information to programs in an area. As Wiltsee explained, “We’d take the [census] tracts and patch them together in some way. The problem is in the rural areas, which are just so enormous that the data they contain becomes meaningless.”

ZIP Codes were not very useful either, because they encompass such large areas. The process of finding information became completely manual and, consequently, not very accessible. “There is a mother lode of information that includes so much more than just population data,” said Wiltsee. “All this information allows us to think creatively about how to solve the problems of getting resources and funding to senior programs. There are an awful lot of possibilities through the richness of the information.”

Wiltsee finds the single-age and one-year data categories in Community Analyst particularly useful. These very specific datasets allow him to better understand the aging population and its trends for planning purposes. Lifestyle information from Esri’s Tapestry Segmentation data was interesting to Wiltsee as well. Tapestry classifies United States residential neighborhoods into 65 unique market segments based on socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. The top three Tapestry segments in Placer County’s largest ZIP Code (95648) are *Boomburbs*, *Rural Resort Dwellers*, and *International Marketplace*. For example, *Rural Resort Dwellers* have a median age of 47.6, are professionals in management or service positions, and own ATVs for leisure activities.

“It’s time to buckle
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Wiltsee found the Esri Consumer Spending dataset useful. This dataset provides insights into the products and services consumers want versus what they actually buy, along with supply and demand by industry sector and area.

All these datasets are used to determine—with more specificity—which programs to offer. Wiltsee is spending a lot of time jotting down questions and developing a database for further investigations. Community Analyst is an invaluable tool for both grant applications and attracting private investment.

The issue of an aging population is important to Placer County. Many residents want to age in place (stay in their homes) instead of living in care facilities. New services and programs are needed to meet the needs of this changing population. As the first wave of the baby boomers hits retirement age, local officials can use Community Analyst to take a good look at this aging population. As the State of California’s Agency on Aging observes, there is a dual challenge: preserving services for the oldest of the old today and planning for the needs of the elderly baby boomers of tomorrow. “It’s time to buckle our seatbelts,” said Wiltsee.

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