



January 5, 2009

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=122218966>

Community Helped Change How We See Retirement

by [Ted Robbins](#)

Fifty years ago, the legendary builder Del Webb wondered whether anyone would be interested in his latest venture, a retirement community built for active seniors. He needn't have worried. When Sun City, Ariz., opened on New Year's weekend in 1960, 100,000 people came to visit. The company sold 1,300 homes.

When it opened, the development that touted its golf courses and recreational centers helped change the country's attitude toward aging. Rather than seeing retirement as a time of limited opportunity or even boredom, Americans began to see the possibility of it being an active, productive period in life.

The first model home, a modest white brick bungalow, is now the Del Webb Sun Cities Museum. By today's standards it's a small home, around 840 square feet. Back in 1960, it sold for \$8,500.

The homes were on one level and were mostly wheelchair accessible. The real attractions, though, were outside: 11 golf courses, eight recreational centers, dozens of arts, crafts and activity clubs. The typical residents were a married couple, no longer working.



Ted Robbins/NPR

A model home from the 1960s is now the Sun Cities Museum.

The concept was so successful and land was so cheap that Del Webb built two additional Sun Cities west of the original. Today there are Sun Cities across the Sunbelt, and even one in Illinois, west of Chicago.

Now the company, which has since been sold to Pulte Homes, is building Sun City Festival, a new community about 25 miles west of the original in Arizona. Homes there start at \$180,000, and the average residents are a little different than they were 50 years ago.

People like Jerry Axton are the norm. His house is twice the size of the original Sun City.

The 62-year-old lives with his wife, but he's not retired: he has a furniture manufacturing business he runs from his home. And he says he's not alone.

"In my entire neighborhood here, everyone is active," Axton says. "Either employed, active, doing some kind of community service or working in a job."

Del Webb says today more than half its residents still work. Many want to keep working to maintain their active lifestyle. But a lot of them need to work because pensions have largely disappeared, along with savings in the recession.



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Older Americans live longer now than they did in 1960. The former "golden years," which once lasted maybe a decade or so, can now last up to 30 years. Marc Freedman, who wrote a history of the Sun City phenomenon, says no one even knows what to call people over 60. They are, he says, in uncharted territory.

"They're neither young nor old...they're neither in midlife nor in traditional retirement," Freedman says. "As a result, it's forcing retirement communities to provide an array of products for people over 60."

Sun City communities now have internet cafes, continuing education classes, and lots of singles.

In the coming years, retirement communities will begin marketing to America's 70 million baby boomers. But even though these communities will have modern amenities and an active environment to tout, most boomers won't choose to live in them.

Gary Englehardt is an economics professor at Syracuse University who specializes in housing and aging. He says the number of homeowners over 65 living in retirement communities is around 6 percent, a number that has remained steady for the last decade. The majority of people want to — or must, because of finances — remain in their current communities.

"There's a very strong demand by older individuals to age in place," Englehardt says. "They want to live in the house they've lived in for the last 20 or 30 years. And they want to stay there and they want to make it work there."

More people will live in places like Sun City simply because there will be more older people. But Englehardt does not believe the percentage will go up. Places like Sun City appeal largely to healthy, higher income, well-educated white individuals. The last census showed 95 percent of the original Sun City's residents are white. Not that Gary Englehardt is down on the concept. He says Sun City has made a huge contribution to society.

"There are a lot of choices now, many more choices than there were 50 years ago," Englehardt says, "and it's not known but it's my guess there'll be a lot more choices when the baby boomers go through. And that's a good thing."

Life after 60, like Sun City at 50, is no longer the endpoint, but rather the beginning of a new phase of life.