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Senior housing demand swells

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Years ago, retirement centers competed with one another for southern Mecklenburg's aging, wealthy residents.

Now, as baby boomers get older and newcomers and their parents flock to the area, retirement communities are filling up.

Some have years-long waiting lists. Others have plans to expand. And at least one company has proposed building an expansive retirement community in the area.

"Definitely, we have seen an increase in demand for this type of housing," said Steve Messer, executive director of Plantation Estates in Matthews.

The community, which opened in 1988, offers different levels of care. There are 344 independent-living apartments, 60 assisted-living suites and 80 skilled nursing beds.

In the last decade, the waiting list for independent living there has swelled from 200 to 400 people, with a wait of two to four years.

Messer said people like the level of care and are drawn to the social activities and amenities at Plantation Estates.

Betty Arnold, who has lived there 11 years, said, "Everybody comes here for the health care."

"Then when you get here, you find out you have everything you wanted your whole life," friend Faye Feniger added.

The growing demand for senior housing is also a result of the nation's ballooning aging population. In 2011, baby boomers, who make up almost 30 percent of the American population, begin to turn 65.

The number of people 65 and older nationwide is expected to double to more than 72 million by 2030, according to the U.S. Census.

In southern Mecklenburg, retirees often follow their children from other states, said Stacy Carter, a spokeswoman for The Laurels in the Village at Carolina Place, an assisted living center in Pineville.

The facility, which has about 100 residents, has a wait list, but because some people sign up years before they plan to move in, it can usually accommodate people with more urgent needs, she said.

About 10 years ago, a handful of assisted living centers opened in southern Mecklenburg, drawn to the area's aging, high-income population, Carter said.

And while they once competed for residents, "now, there's enough residents for everyone," she said. "It is getting a little bit tougher to get in."

The market is so strong that Erickson Retirement Communities, a national chain, wants to build 1,200 attached housing units, a 96-bed assisted living facility and a 60-bed skilled nursing facility on about 80 acres in Matthews.

The proposal has sparked concerns from nearby residents about traffic and the buildings' height. Matthews officials are expected to make a decision about the facility this month.

Plantation Estates is growing, too, Messer said.

This fall, the facility will begin construction on 16 new independent-living apartments, a new fitness center and pool area and renovations.

ACTS Retirement-Life Communities, which owns Plantation Estates, also hopes to build a similar retirement community nearby.

The company is in the design and land-purchase stages now and will approach Matthews officials in coming months to request rezoning, Messer said.

As local facilities race to catch up, he expects the demand for senior housing to keep growing.

"The baby boomers are going to come in and it's going to mushroom," Messer said. "There's a growing need as Charlotte-Mecklenburg continues to grow, and we're all in this together."

Levels of Care

- **INDEPENDENT LIVING:** Age-restricted single-family homes, condos or apartments. Maintenance, meals and transportation are sometimes included. Health care is not provided; home health-care workers must be contracted privately. Home health-care costs about \$15 to \$30 per hour.
- **ASSISTED LIVING:** Combination of housing, personalized support services and care. Meals are available. Costs \$32,500 per year on average. There are about 40 assisted living centers in Mecklenburg County.
- **SKILLED NURSING:** Complete 24-hour care. Costs about \$75,000 per year, on average. There are about 20 skilled care centers in Mecklenburg.
- **CONTINUING CARE RETIREMENT:** Combination of independent living, assisted living and skilled nursing care. Residents pay entrance fee and monthly living fee. Transportation, maintenance, meals and activities are included. Residents must be able to live on their own when they move in.

SOURCE: ACTS Retirement-Life Communities