

Michigan Senators Introduce “Elder Friendly” Communities Bill Package

The Michigan Office of Services to the Aging is encouraging cities, townships, and counties to make themselves more “elder friendly” in response to the latest demographic trend. Society is aging at an unprecedented rate and people are living longer than ever before. This aging of the population presents significant challenges and opportunities, and Michigan should be aggressive in making our state and its communities a desirable place to retire. Older adults are an important part of our families and social fabric, and they contribute positively to our state’s economy through their spending, investments, and volunteer contributions.

An “elder friendly” community is one that provides opportunities for people to age in place by making resources available to facilitate daily living and independence. It means amenities like grocery stores, pharmacies, medical care, transportation, social support, and churches are within easy reach and accessible to older citizens so they may continue to live and make contributions to their community. It means social and health services are available when needed. And it means that the community is safe, that housing is affordable, and that the community environment is one in which older adults may live with dignity and independence.

Public policies are needed to allow and encourage the development of public amenities that encourage older adult involvement in community life, rather than shrinking into a world of social isolation due to declining health, mobility or income, or concerns for safety. Even basic design aspects, such as wide doorways that open automatically, or heated sidewalks that minimize the risks of a slip and fall in cold weather, can mean a significant difference in the social engagement of older adults in their communities. The effort to promote “elder friendly” communities has legitimized the importance of these and other features, and raised awareness that such innovations make communities not only more sensitive to the needs and concerns of older adults, but more livable for individuals of all ages.

Leadership by the Michigan Senate

A bi-partisan package of bills (SB 1327 - SB 1334) was introduced in May, 2010, by a group of senators that will prompt local communities to give greater consideration to the needs of older adults in municipal planning activities, and provide them with additional tools to create more elder friendly public amenities and facilities. These bills implement many of the concepts and recommendations that are advocated for by proponents of the “elder friendly communities” and “livable communities” movements.



Proposed State “Elder Friendly” Community Legislation

Elder Friendly Community Loans and Subsidies to Developers (SB 1327 Introduced by Sen. Allen)

Gives Downtown Development Authorities the authority to give out “elder friendly community” low interest loans and subsidies to developers of mixed use and residential housing designed to be “desirable to senior citizens” in the opinion of the DDA board. Presumably the loans and subsidies would come from debt incurred by the DDA, with the money repaid out of the “captured” property tax increases it collects.

Establishes “Elder Friendly” Structure Standards (SB 1328 Introduced by Sen. Pappageorge)

Allows the Department of Consumer and Industry Services to create standards for an “elder friendly” dwelling designation that would apply to the construction and renovation of residential buildings. At a minimum, the standards would require that structures provide one-story, barrier-free living; doorways and hallways at least 32 inches wide to accommodate wheelchairs; flush entryways and thresholds; nonslip floors; lever door handles; and rocker light switches.

Requires MSHDA to Develop Senior Housing (SB 1329 Introduced by Sen. Basham)

Requires 10 percent of all housing projects financed by the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) in certain areas to be for elderly residents.

Allows Heated Sidewalks to be Financed in Downtowns (SB 1330 Introduced by Sen. Allen)

Includes heated sidewalks among the things that a Downtown Development Authority can borrow money for, with the money repaid by the “captured” property tax increases it collects, which otherwise would go to other local government uses.

Requires Consideration of Senior Citizen Needs in Local Planning (SB 1331 Introduced by Sen. Cropsey)

Includes criteria regarding “elder friendly communities” in the law authorizing city, village, township and county land use planning or ordinances, and requires them to consider senior citizen needs.

Requires Consideration of Senior Citizen Needs in the Adoption of Local Codes (SB 1332 Introduced by Sen. Barcia)

Includes criteria regarding “elder friendly communities” in the law authorizing city, village, township and county zoning ordinances.

Allows Heated Sidewalks to be Financed in Development of Public Buildings and Facilities (HB 1333 Introduced by Sen. Jacobs)

Allows heated sidewalks to be included among the things that a “Corridor Improvement” Authority can borrow money for, with the money repaid by the special assessments or “captured” property tax increases it collects.

Allows Buildings Renovated with Public Funds to Include “Elder Friendly” Design Elements (HB 1334 Introduced by Sen. Olshove)

Authorizes “neighborhood enterprise zone” tax breaks for developers of housing that meets “elderly friendly” criteria like that proposed in Senate Bill 1328.

AAA 1-B Proposed Advocacy Recommendation

The AAA 1-B believes that the provisions of Senate Bills 1327 through 1334 provide needed direction and authority for a variety of public entities that will result in improved access and safety for older adults to public facilities, amenities, and housing. The AAA 1-B recommends that the Michigan Legislature adopt SB 1327 - 1334, and further recommends that legislation direct MSHDA to promote the utilization of CAPS (Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist) certified builders that have secured specialized training on elder friendly building design and renovations.