

Wealth of Senior Housing Options

By Evelyn Preston



Bay Area housing costs impact every stage of life, especially seniors. Empty nesters and

retirees who want to stay put but downsize, seek a CCRC (continuing care retirement community) or just enjoy a new lifestyle, find that the financial and emotional aspects of moving are intertwined.

Although it's important to know the market and do the math, Dottie Monroe, long time Broker Associate with Alain Pinel in Los Altos, adds sage advice. "Making decisions early," she says, "insures that future changes will reflect our own personal desires vs. someone else determining our options, especially if we should become ill or incapacitated."

Question: *With retirement communities expanding in our desirable but expensive communities, is it still possible to find something attractive but affordable for middle class seniors?*

Answer: The Bay Area offers a wide spectrum of senior living facilities from no frills mobile home parks to studio/small apartment, assisted living rental complexes up through luxurious top-of-the-line Vi at Palo Alto. There are less expensive buy-ins (initial cash outlay), like the lovely Sequoias and The Forum, religious affiliated senior communities and "downtown" apartment-homes. Most offer in-house on-going care or contract out for

health services. Monthly fees cover meals, amenities and services and usually increase for assisted living or skilled nursing needs. Some, like the non-profit Channing House, offer life care with a set-from-the-start monthly fee. The amenities, care levels, entrance fees and reimbursement to heirs vary with each site.

Question: *I'm in good health, have family in the area and plan to sell my large home but still live on my own. Are there other options besides condo living or a CCRC retirement community?*

Answer: Dottie suggests investing in a duplex which offers current income, the comfort of a close neighbor and the option for family or a caregiver to replace a renter later on if needed. The Villages in San Jose, although a senior condo community (a few rentals) offers special country club features but no continuing care component. The HOA (Homeowner's Assoc.) fee covers: low cost golf courses, swimming pools and even includes public safety, insurance costs and a host of indoor/outdoor activities.

Question: *What's available for seniors with fixed incomes and minor disabilities who need TLC and daily care?*

Answer: Small group board and care homes with 3 to 6 (sometimes more) occupants who require general assistance (bathing, laundry, etc.) offer meals, meds and a 24 hour caregiver. It's essential to compare the costs and level of help or enlist a specialist in this area. On your own or with a pro, homework's required. Memory care housing is in a category by itself. Remember Dottie Monroe's good counsel—start early to familiarize yourself with our area's wealth of choices.

Question: *I'm a widow who frequently travels. I'm caught between the cost of an often empty apartment/condo and living with my children. Any ideas?*

Answer: A growing number of single seniors opt for shared housing. It's a cost-effective, companionable solution with flexible living arrangements. Far from a boarding house atmosphere, grown-up roommates can enjoy home-y surroundings, indulge their diverse interests from gardening to cooking and fashion a whole new family.

Question: *What are some saving strategies that will help aging seniors remain in their homes?*

Answer: Reverse mortgage programs become more cost-effective, some insured by the FHA.

A few specialized programs offer up-front cash where a lender shares in a portion of the home's future appreciation. Propositions 58 and 60 give property tax relief when downsizing and for heirs. It can be cost-effective to retrofit your home with lift-chairs, grab-bars, ramps, etc. And the VA offers paid caregivers if you or your spouse qualify for military benefits.

Question: *What's the best advice for seniors contemplating change?*

Answer: Real estate pros know that our homes reflect our past lives. Besides penciling out the financial/tax aspects, any move must pass emotional muster for a positive quality of life of our own choosing.

Evie Preston has worked as a financial advisor for over 25 years. Her latest book, "Memoirs of the Money Lady" is available at www.eviepreston.com. She can be reached at 650.494.7443.