

# Older suburbs are turning gray as median age levels increase

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Morrisdale Estates in Euless was developed in the 1960s and is still populated primarily by the original homeowners.

By Steve Campbell

EULESS -- With spacious homes, hilly streets and leafy lots, Morrisdale Estates was a bucolic suburban mecca for young families in the 1960s and 1970s.

With plenty of bedrooms for all those children, yards large enough for pools, and good schools and parks nearby, the neighborhood drew engineers and executives who worked at Bell Helicopter and pilots who wanted a short commute to Dallas/Fort Worth Airport.

Today, an "amazing number of those people are still here," said 77-year-old Bruce Ebert, a retired attorney who, with his wife, Honore, raised two children in the neighborhood known for its shaded streets and Christmas lights.

"There were a lot of kids in the neighborhood. Now it's more mature," he said.

The same can be said of Euless as a whole.

From 2000 to 2009, the city's median age crept up by 1.6 years to 33.8, and 13.7 percent of households include a person over 65, according to American Community Survey data released by the Census Bureau in December.

In 2009, 7.6 percent of the city's residents were 65 or older. That compares with 5.8 percent in 2000 and 4 percent in 1990.

The maturation of Morrisdale Estates and Euless isn't an anomaly. In predominantly Anglo suburbs across Tarrant County, seniors are "aging in place" in towns as different as Kennedale, Colleyville, Hurst and Westover Hills.

In 24 of 38 communities in Tarrant County, the median age is now above the Texas median of 33.

The "oldest" city in the county is tiny Westover Hills, where the median age is 52.9. That means half the population is older than that.

In the town of only 658 residents, 55.3 percent of households include someone over 65, a 17.3 percent hike since 2000.

The second- and third-oldest are Lakeside (48) and Pantego (47.7). Pelican Bay matured the fastest, with the median age going up by 5.6 years from 29.3 to 34.9.

In Colleyville, the median age increased from 40 to 43.2, and the number of households with people over 65 rose from 12 to 17.6 percent. By comparison, Fort Worth's median age is 31.1 and the percentage of households with people over 65 declined from 19 to 17.1.

The contrast is even greater in small, affluent Westlake. The median age dropped from 47.1 years to 37.6 and the over-65 households fell from 11.6 to 8.4 percent as the town's population more than quadrupled over the decade.

Demographer Steve Murdock of Rice University says the graying of the suburbs is primarily a product of ethnicity.

"In general, the reason you are seeing that in the suburbs is that they tend to have higher proportions of Anglos," Murdock said. "The age structure of minority populations, particularly Hispanic populations, is going to be younger."

With the first baby boomers reaching 65 this year, America's senior moment is fast approaching.

By 2030, all the baby boomers will be seniors, resulting in a shift that demographers call the "age wave." The percentage of the population 65 and older is projected to increase from 12.6 percent in 2010 to 19 percent in 2030, according to the Census Bureau. Murdock says there will be no escaping the impact of the boomers in Texas, but he adds that the state is younger than the national median of 36.5 years. "Their impact will be muted in Texas compared to many states because of continued in-migration -- people that move tend to be younger -- and the growing Hispanic population," he said.

### **Aging in place**

Euless Mayor Mary Lib Saleh has lived in Morrisdale Estates since 1964 and has watched the change.

"The draw was good schools and a house large enough for my five children," she said. "Eighty percent of the homes are still occupied by the first-time buyers -- that includes the children that have moved back into the community.

"But I see the aging-in-place phenomenon all over the city," Saleh said. "That's why we've worked hard in Euless to gain recognition as a certified retirement community by the state of Texas."

Other "first-tier" suburbs -- the towns sandwiched between the big cities and rural areas -- are tuning into the change.

In Kennedale, where the median age has risen by three years to 37.7 since 2000, City Manager Bob Hart has taken notice.

"I think the trend we are seeing is aging in place. People in the North and Northeast want to move somewhere warm. People in Texas want to stay in Texas, and that's what I'm seeing in Kennedale," said Hart, who is on the National League of Cities' First-Tier Council.

"We've got a good school system, but the enrollment has plateaued, so we are looking at ways to be more attractive to the aging population," he said, noting that transportation is a key issue for the city's seniors, especially access to medical care.

Saleh has the same concerns.

"We need to be sure we have adequate health services. We need to provide transportation for those seniors that can no longer provide it for themselves. Transportation for seniors wasn't on the radar 20 years ago, but it is now."

One of the challenges facing many first-tier suburbs is that their housing stock is aging, too, said Christiana McFarland, program director for finance and economic development at the National League of Cities.

"Most are in need of developing housing options to remain competitive with newer suburbs. In many cases, they have an influx of a new population as well as an older population who would like to age in place," McFarland said.

"First-tier suburbs are a microcosm of what is going to happen in the country going forward -- they tend to be an indicator of what we can expect next," she said.

### **Catering to seniors**

A few miles west of Morrisdale Estates on Pipeline Road, at the Hurst Senior Citizens Activity Center, director Linda Rea sees the graying of the suburbs every day. Hurst's population is older than Euless': the median age is 38.2 and 26.3 percent of households have a member over 65.

An average of 300 guests a day come to the 27,500-square foot center, which opened in late 2009, to work out, take classes ranging from ceramics to tai chi, play pool, work on computers or browse books in a library that includes a fireplace.

"We stay busy. Twice last week, we maxed out in the fitness center with 40 people at one time," Rea said, noting that the center is also a great deal for people 55 and up. Hurst residents pay only \$20 a year and nonresidents \$80.

With Hurst 98 percent built out, City Manager Allan Weegar says city leaders have focused on maintaining facilities and adding new ones that cater to its population.

The city plans to develop senior housing next to the senior center, he said.

"You have a fire station there for emergency medical services, the center for recreation, a park and a Braum's. It's a self-contained area for transitional seniors," Weegar said.

"Throughout the city, people have realized that the services we offer make them stay," he said. "On the flip side, we are also seeing young families starting to move into the older areas of Hurst as homes are vacated through attrition, so to speak."

Marcy Davis, the 73-year-old chairwoman of Hurst's senior citizens advisory board, says the gleaming senior facility is her social center. She and her now-deceased husband, who worked for the Federal Aviation Administration, bought their home near L.D. Bell High School in 1966 because they wanted good schools for their three kids.

"This used to be way out in the country," she said, with a nod toward Airport Freeway. "That wasn't here. The city has grown up around me."

Carla Jutson, director of Meals on Wheels of Tarrant County, said the age shift is especially evident in Northeast Tarrant.

"I've been here 36 years. Where we used to serve inner cities mainly and had very little out in the suburbs, now we have so much in the suburbs and the inner-city numbers have gone down," Jutson said.

"We've seen tremendous growth in the Mid-Cities in eastern Tarrant County," she said. In Hurst, the agency serves 74 seniors a day, compared with 34 in 1999.

For Davis, a former nursing home administrator, it just seems like a natural evolution.

"There's a lot of people like me in the neighborhood. They don't leave until they die," she said with a laugh. "This is home, and we stay until we're gone."

Back in Morrisdale Estates, the life cycle is already coming full circle as grown-up kids move back to the neighborhood, often in their parents' former homes, Ebert said. "At one point, the kids were all gone," the retired attorney said. "Now people are talking about a new cycle of kids on the streets."

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