



Downturn, boomers will alter everything, Va. researcher says

By [Bryan McKenzie](#)

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A tanking economy and aging population will result in a new frugality with intergenerational households, changes in transportation modes and more seniors spending their final years at home, a Richmond-based researcher warns.

John W. Martin, of the Southeastern Institute of Research, told a local forum audience Wednesday that a wave of baby boomers will crash down on communities, forcing changes in nearly every aspect of life.

“Boomers have been transformation agents since the beginning, in music and politics and civil rights and relationships,” he told the forum audience. “There were so many of us that a company called Gerber figured out that they could mash peas and sell them in jars to our parents. Madison Avenue discovered they could market direct to us some healthy foods like Cap’n Crunch, and we’d convince our parents to buy it for us.”

Statistics show boomers will comprise about 25 percent of the country’s population in 15 years. The “personality of the generation,” defined as those born between 1946 and 1968, includes a

strong work ethic, optimism, disavowing the status quo, belief in personal control and a sense of entitlement. Boomers also tend to see themselves as far younger than they are, Martin said.

Because of those traits, Martin said, boomers would work to change society to meet their needs. He said boomers will eschew nursing homes for in-home, long-term care, work and live longer and live in the same neighborhoods with younger and older generations. That means they will tax existing resources for home care, bus and public transportation and change the way homes and houses are designed, he said.

“This is coming. The question is, what to do next,” Martin said. “Today is about upgrading your insight about your community and its services. Are you, as a community, a good place not to retire, but to live in and to age in? Boomers are not moving away to retire; they are going to stay in place.”

Martin made his remarks at the Age Wave Forum at Piedmont Virginia Community College, cosponsored by a variety of agencies, including the Virginia Department for the Aging, the Older Dominion Partnership, the Jefferson Area Board for Aging, the Virginia Municipal League and the Virginia Association of Counties.

The forum was designed to give leaders a heads-up on the coming wave of aging adults and what may be done to prepare.

Among the recommendations Martin made is changing medical services to provide more emphasis on preventative care rather than acute care, including treatment and prevention of chronic diseases such as arthritis, hypertension and diabetes. He encouraged changes in

transportation to provide safer alternatives and to provide flexible senior housing arrangements integrated into the general community.

“Boomers do not have a linear lifespan like the generations that came before them. They do not retire at 65 and sit in a rocking chair,” Martin said. “They may be 50 and on their third marriage, be parenting, caring for a parent, retired and working a second career and grandparenting all at the same time. They are not interested in moving to Florida to retire. They are busy and engaged in life and interested in staying right where they are.”

Martin said the recession, combined with boomer generational traits that include focusing less on career and more on family as they age, likely will translate into less conspicuous consumption, even as the economy improves.

“The best way to plan for the boomer wave is to make a plan,” he said. “It’s a good idea to put boomers in charge of it. They love to be in control and they love deadlines and this is all about them.”