

Op/Ed

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 Keyword: **opinion**

THE BOOMER PROJECT

Who Are We . . . And How Are We Aging?

Back in 1965, The Who screamed “I hope I die before I get old!” and America’s youth loved it. Baby boomers, as we are now called, spent the ’60s rallying around the cry “Don’t trust anyone over 30” and making fun of “old” people. Becoming old was certainly nothing to look forward to.

Forty years later, most of us baby boomers haven’t followed Pete Townshend’s advice. We’re still here. Some might even say we’re old. But, we’re not going anywhere any time soon. We’re just going to keep growing “older” for the next 40 or more years, until the last one turns out the lights. Until then, it’s up to us boomers to decide if growing older is a good thing or not — for us as individuals



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and for the communities we call home.

It’s inevitable that boomers will have to deal with potentially life-changing experiences: changes in health, limited transportation options, fixed incomes, rising prescription drug costs, changes in housing, and, yes, even AARP membership.

But rather than sit back and have these issues swamp us, something profound is happening. Boomers are coming together with government and nonprofits to make sure where they live now is a great place to live in the future — when we are all *older*.

BY 2030, the over-65 population is expected to double, thanks to boomers reaching that plateau and beyond. Here in Virginia, for example, the Census Bureau anticipates that the over-65 population will almost double by 2030, reaching 1.7 million citizens — nearly 1 in every 5 residents of the commonwealth. The impact of our larger, older population will cut across obvious things like health care, housing, and transportation, as well as less-than-obvious things like recreational amenities, tax bases, public education, and legal issues. All who work in the senior services business, in government, in health care, and in other arenas realize they will have their hands full.

No wonder we’ve seen “age wave” planning efforts blossom in dozens of cities and states across the nation. The common planning formula: Indus-



Who members Pete Townshend, Keith Moon, Roger Daltrey, and John Entwistle, in a publicity photo from 1971.

try leaders in aging services make a list of unmet service needs and point to the government for future funding. A business-like planning perspective, as well as the business community itself, is notably absent.

In Virginia our thinking is a little more progressive. A group of us has organized “The Older Dominion Project” to work together to create a thoughtful plan for our future. The Older Dominion Project (olderdominion.org) embraces the concept that Virginia is and should always be a great place for *people of all ages*. We want to de-

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across the commonwealth. We’re learning all we can from the states and localities that are ahead of us. We’re listening to Virginia’s nationally renowned experts on aging, such as Dr. Richard Lindsay and Dr. Edward Ansello, and other thought-leaders across our academic communities. We’re including representatives from state government, leading foundations, and our non-profit community. But unlike most other age-wave planning efforts going on around the country, the Older Dominion Project includes our business community too.

WE’RE NOT sure why business isn’t involved in other states. The age wave will have a tremendous impact on our work force and workplace. To counter the expected shortage of workers, new policies and infrastructure will be needed for *older* workers.

To help support what will be an increase in the demand for family caregivers, a whole new way of thinking about jobs and careers may emerge, not only to maintain competitive recruitment and retention programs, but also to control costs.

Today, one in four households is caring for, or managing the care of, a relative. A MetLife study estimated that caregiving costs American employers \$33 billion in lost productivity annually. This includes costs associated with replacing employees, absenteeism, workday interruptions, supervisory time, unpaid leave, and reducing hours from full-time to part-time.

These costs are expected to dramatically increase in the future. According to the National Family Caregivers Association, the 65+ population will increase at a rate of 2.3 percent annually, but the number of family members available to care for them will increase at a rate of only .8 percent. Understanding such business issues makes age-wave planning important in the long term.

With business leaders joining others at the planning table, the Older Dominion Project has answered The Who. Now we’re focusing on the *what, when, where* and *how*. The first task, funded by the Richmond Memorial Health Foundation, is to conduct research that can inform our work and get everyone “talkin’ ’bout my generation.”

• John W. Martin is the president & CEO of the Southeastern Institute of Research, home of the Boomer Project.

VIVA THE VITAL!

A series on boomer-related issues.

velop a blueprint for the commonwealth to prosper in a future when we’ll have a larger mix of older residents.

This week the Older Dominion Project held a kick-off meeting with key constituents from