

Making the Most of "Stay and Play" Visits

By Elyse Umlauf-Garneau

The *New York Times* likens them to college visits without the kegs. Others call them stay and play visits. It's the strategy baby boomers are using to test-drive active adult communities.

A host of active adult communities, from big national names such as Del Webb (www.pulte.com/DelWebb/index.aspx) and smaller ones like Watermere at Southlake (www.watermere-at-southlake.com/), Southlake, Texas, are allowing prospective buyers to spend several nights or a weekend at communities to experience them firsthand.

Though some consider such programs a marketing strategy for a tepid economy, it's a smart way for consumers to shop. That's according to Jennifer Prell, a partner with Cary, Illinois-based Silver Connections (www.asilverconnection.com), an elder resource network that addresses seniors' housing and moving issues. "Boomers get to try a place and see if the climate fits their personality. That's

huge. You don't want to move in and suddenly find that you don't like these people," she says.

However, Prell recommends longer visits--30- to 90-day stays--before making any commitment. "The first few days you're getting used to the idea and everyone is nice to you," she comments. "What happens after that? What are normal days like?"

Here are 10 considerations before making a move:

-Location--Determining where you want to be is the first hurdle. Do you want a complete change of scene in an out-of-state venue? Do you need to be close to family? Do you want to spend part of the year near your current home and the winter elsewhere?

- Bigger world--Assess the environment beyond the walls of the community. What kind of amenities, services, activities and medical care are available? Prell points out that though you may be healthy now, healthcare (for information on U.S. hospital rankings, see <http://health.usnews.com/health/best-hospitals>) will play a larger role as you age. You don't want to land in a city with

second-rate care. For insight on retirement in Canadian cities, see <http://list.canadianbusiness.com/rankings/bestplacelive/2009/Default.aspx?sp2=1&d1=a&sc1=6>.

-Budget--Can you afford it? Factor in all housing expenses, along with the community's monthly fees to be certain your assets will cover the move for the long term.

-Extra costs--Examine exactly what's included and what costs extra. Are lawn maintenance and snow removal, for example, provided by the association or are you responsible? And is transportation for those day trips or nights out at the symphony free or is there a fee? Are there additional costs involved for club participation? All such expenses need to be factored into your monthly budget.

-Professional help--Visit professionals, including a financial planner, an elder law attorney, and a real estate attorney. The financial planner can crunch numbers to be certain you have enough funds. The elder law experts can put a plan in place for powers of attorney, and the real estate lawyer can examine all the community and purchase documents.

-Looking inward--What do you really enjoy doing with your time? Though a long roster of activities may look exciting, just how much tennis, swimming, yoga and art you will really do. "If you're moving to an active community and you're not active and

won't be, it might be a waste," observes Prell. "If you're going to stay in your house and not talk to neighbors, attend activities or play, consider something slower paced."

-Rules and bylaws--Read through the community documents. It will give you a sense of how rigid or relaxed a place is and whether it has the right temperament for you. As an example, the rules of a Florida condo building indicate that tree climbing and removal of coconuts are forbidden. Though the concept offers a chuckle, it's also an indication that the board and residents may be rigid and spend an inordinate amount of time nitpicking and scrutinizing every aspect of daily life.

-Social scene--Carefully observe the social dynamics and chat with residents to uncover their likes and dislikes about the community. Some communities can be clique-ish and mirror some of the dynamics of high school, points out Prell. She recalls one woman who routinely was shunned by a clique of others during lunchtime at her retirement community.

-The long view--You may not be able to play tennis 10 years from now. How good a fit will the community be if you can't participate fully in activities? Will you still enjoy the environment and are there other options for filling your time?

-Age--Consider your age today. If you're making a move to an active community at 55, the amenities can be phenomenal. If you're closer to 65,

consider how much you'll be able to do. "If you're over 80, choosing an active lifestyle is inappropriate," says Prell. "Health starts declining and these communities don't have services in

place to help." After all, keep in mind that you're living independently.

"Age is huge. Do it while you're young," says Prell.

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