

# Elderly can bring benefits to downtown

*Chester Smolski*

The elderly are becoming an increasingly influential group in our society. Recent outpourings of mail and telegrams to representatives in Washington in response to government-proposed cuts in Social Security underscored this ability to influence change. Congressional members are listening to the growing numbers of elderly who are making their voices heard through their votes.

Nationally, longevity now exceeds 70 years for the total population and approaches 80 for women. Most of these elder Americans enjoy a measure of financial security that, although battered by inflation, allows a certain degree of freedom to buy goods and services, be it a new dress or suit or a trip to Florida. It also provides business with new market possibilities. While the elderly are generally not big spenders because of limited income and a shortened outlook for the future, their increasing numbers represent a sizable market that merchants should consider. This is especially true in Rhode Island and, even more the case, in Providence.

The latest authoritative count of the state's population in 1970 determined the median age to be 29.2 years, with 11 percent 65 years or older, numbering more than 104,000. Figures from the 1980 count have not been released, but earlier projections by the state put the median age now at 31.6 with 13.2 percent elderly, or more than 124,000 persons.

While demographic projections are always "iffy," the outlook is for a continuing trend toward an older population. By the year 2,000, when the state's population will reach one million, the median age is expected to increase to 37.2, with 14.3 percent or more than 144,000 elderly citizens.

The elderly are already concentrated in cities and, as families with children continue their exodus to the suburbs (Providence lost more than 23,000 persons in the last 10 years) and housing for the elderly continues to be built in cities, their percentages will likely increase. In 1970, nearly 15 percent of Providence's population was 65 years of age and older, making it the highest proportion of all communities in the state (the 24 percent elderly of the 489 persons living on Block Island is an unusual case), and the 1980 count will likely show an increase.

The Providence downtown has the greatest concentration of elderly persons in the state, resulting from a combination of elderly already living there, in such places as Cathedral Apartments and Dexter Manor, together with the best accessibility by public transport from all points in the state. With free rides on Rhode Island Public Transit Authority buses in off-peak hours on weekdays and all day on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays, the elderly have little difficulty getting downtown. That the elderly take advantage of this is evident on any mid-morning bus when a junior citizen may find himself to be the only fare-paying customer on a full bus.

How can downtown interests best capture this special market? Aggressive merchandising (until recently, something not too evident), strong leadership and a management vehicle are key ingredients. A business community that has already demonstrated leadership and commitment to the downtown by sponsoring an organization to clean its walkways might very well make use of this existing vehicle — the Downtown Providence Improvement Association — to gather information on the problem of retailing opportunities for the elderly, and work to expand these in the downtown. It could also serve as a managing vehicle, much as suburban malls have their management operation, to bring merchants together and to work cooperatively for the business enhancement of this critical area of the city.

Aggressive merchandising needs to be combined with cooperative promotional efforts specifically directed at this target population. Such activities might include the following: discount hours or days for the elderly; matinees at Trinity Square Theater at 10 a.m., rather than in the afternoon; restaurants that give discounts for lunches before noon and after 2 p.m.; free parking on certain days to draw suburban elderly; outdoor entertainment directed toward the elderly; increased and visible security at certain locations; working closely with downtown churches, which already provide centers for elderly gatherings; and special events for the elderly at the Civic Center or Ocean State Theater. This is certainly not a comprehensive list of all the possibilities, but it suggests some of the possibilities for capturing a market that is not being fully served.

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