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Alexandria Times
The Alexandria Times newspaper provides our print and online readers with the most comprehensive and localized coverage possible in the City of Alexandria, with a political tint that being in the shadow of the nation's capital makes inevitable.

Whether it's a shake-up at City Hall or a new milkshake at Dairy Godmother, our attention is focused on Alexandria, allowing us to bring you a unique mesh of city and community news that our fair and historic city on the Potomac deserves. Don't worry Alexandria — we've got you covered.

BY RUSS GLICKMAN

We've entered a new year, but also an unprecedented new era — one in which the portion of the U.S. population aged 65 and older is increasing dramatically.

The cause of the shift, of course, is that the nation's largest generational segment — baby boomers — is officially matriculating as seniors. By most estimates, this older demographic will grow steadily for the next 25 years.

In Alexandria, which offers such an impressive diversity of personal choices and housing options, the challenge to the aging-in-place specialist is to stay ahead of evolving technologies, learn from relevant field experience and remain open to untried creative solutions that can be customized to individual needs.

With that said, here are a few aging-in-place planning guidelines that can be addressed immediately.

DECIDE WHO'S INVOLVED

Usually, it's one person whose mobility and access requirements are behind the search for modifications to their physical environment. What tends to be forgotten is that these issues also are a family matter.

Since modifications to a residence can affect all those who call it home, an aging-in-place solution is generally more successful when the spouse — or the whole family — joins in the planning. Generally, this results in a house that works better for everyone, including guests.

THINK BIG WITH REDESIGNS

Because a senior's reduced mobility may not be noticed for a while, it's prudent to do simple things to prevent falls and accidents. Remove loose rugs and other tripping hazards from main pathways, for

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instance. Bathrooms, in particular, need attention. Grab bars and curbless showers are a good starting point.

As for stairs, hallways and doors, even those who don't require assistance benefit from reassessing the home's essential pathways. If you can't climb the stairs as quickly as you could five years ago, what's the forecast for the next five years? Widening halls and doorways to ADA compliance — from 30 inches to 36 inches — is a commonsense deci-

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sion that also can open up a floor plan and increase natural lighting.

Then there are walkways and how to improve access to motor vehicles. While a wheelchair-friendly walkway rises no more than 1-inch per foot, even those without mobility challenges often prefer the more gracious slope, which eliminates needless stairs and replaces the traditional front stoop with a zero-step entry.

Back inside the home, everything should be stored within reach. The essence of good universal design is a plan that requires less bodily extension. For example, light switches should be reachable from a sitting position and needed items stored where they are accessible without climbing or other risky reaching. Lower, shallower cabinets are a reasonable choice if there's a foreseeable mobility concern.

Lastly, consider intercoms and video security features. A front entrance cam linked to a laptop is an inexpensive and practical way to find out who's

at the front door. Technologies of every kind are making it easier for people with mobility challenges to stay in their homes.

CONTINGENCY PLANNING

Often there is no way to predict when an individual walking less securely will transition to a walker and then a wheelchair, so an aging-in-place plan is inherently about preparing for contingencies. If you were to need a wheelchair lift or even an elevator, where would it go? These questions should be addressed in the early stages of developing a plan.

You should think long-term, but consider resale. Increasingly, homeowners with mobility concerns are considering how the solutions enhance the value of their home. An elderly couple who wanted to concentrate their primary living space on one floor, for example, chose changes that later can be marketed as an in-law suite should they eventually move to an assisted living facility.

The writer is a certified aging-in-place specialist.

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