

Aging Lifestyles: City's capital amenities are no urban legend

by Joe_Volz

Perhaps, Kate and I are on the cutting edge of a new demographic trend - abandoning the countryside for a return to the big city.

A while back, we wrote a column announcing that we were tossing in our quiet retirement paradise in the Maryland mountains after five years and returning to the big city, Washington.

That move was not greeted with acclaim by friends at either location. In fact, you could say the reaction ranged from puzzlement to sheer derision.

Our neighbors where we now live in Frederick, Md., 50 miles northwest of Washington, could not figure out why we would even consider leaving the small city (it still has farmland within the city limits, though) to move to the nation's capital. They argued, quite accurately, that Frederick was quiet and peaceful, slow moving, endowed with plenty of open space and pure air and had minimal crime. So why leave such idyllic surroundings for a big city full of violent crime, traffic, noise and air pollution, not to mention more political windbags per square foot than any other place in the country?

Our friends in Washington took a different approach. They could not figure out why we ever left the District of Columbia in the first place. They seemed completely oblivious to any crime, traffic or air pollution problems. They loved the excitement of the city, the extensive cultural life, even the constant feuding of the politicians. They felt alive in the city.

Those conflicting arguments left us feeling a bit at loose ends, unappreciated by either city or rural denizens.

That is, until we read the latest study on the graying of America by the renowned demographer, William Frey, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

He concedes in "Mapping the Growth of Older America," that seniors (over 65) and pre-seniors (aged 55-64) moving from cities to suburbs outnumber those relocating into the cities. However, he notes that "those moving into the cities are on average more highly educated, more affluent and less likely to be married than their suburbanized counterparts."

Hmm. Does that mean that we seniors moving back to the city, even if we are still a trickle, are the smart

ones?

I got to thinking of all the advantages of living in the city, which I had ignored in my rush to leave Washington after Sept. 11, 2001, when I feared more terrorist attacks.

For one thing, Washington and many other larger cities have sophisticated public transit systems that are almost nonexistent in smaller areas. Washington has an extensive subway system, Metro, for example. Frederick has a slow-paced train that limps the 50 miles to Washington in 90 minutes. And the last train out of Frederick is 7 a.m. For us older folks, medical care is essential. Washington has a world-class hospital system and a plethora of accomplished specialists. Frederick doesn't.

Washington has great cultural activity, whether the Kennedy Center or a number of fine museums along the Smithsonian Mall, which are free. Frederick has a few minor league museums. Washington has a major league baseball team, the Nationals. Frederick has a minor league team.

And, maybe, we city folks will not be fighting the crowds in Washington with so many seniors staying in the suburbs that they fell in love with decades ago before and clogging up those areas. "They graying of the suburbs," muses Frey. He says, "the sheer number of baby boomers entering seniorhood indicates that even a small share of city-directed boomers can have a positive population impact on the cities. Those impacts could be economically valuable, too, if such movers are financially well off and able to purchase homes in upscale neighborhoods." So, maybe we are starting a trend. But we don't want too many people moving back to the city, do we?

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