

Aging in Place Salt Spring Style: Where Will You Live?

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“I couldn’t have waited another year,” Donald panted as he staggered up the stairs burdened by boxes. Despite being age seventy-seven, he was doing all the work. Back then, I was only fifty-eight, but couldn’t help. I’d pulled a groin muscle by getting on a horse for the first time in fifty years. I couldn’t move myself let alone boxes.

It was September, 1998, and we were downsizing to a town house. Careful about our decision, Cottonwood Close ticked all the boxes: great view, check; quality finishing, check; no extra gardening, check; close to the hospital, check.

“But why are you buying a house with steps?” my mother asked. “When you get older, they’ll become a problem.” She was four months older than Donald, so she knew better.

Teeth clenched, he retorted: “As old as I ever get, I will always be able to handle seven steps at a time.”

“Besides,” I chimed in, “without them, we wouldn’t have this terrific view.”

Ten months later, Donald had a massive stroke and was confined to a wheel chair for the rest of his life. In an instant, the

view and the finishing touches were useless criteria for deciding where to live.

Denying our declining years is a risky game. It starts with the assumption that we will always be doing what we're doing now. Donald bought his Fulford property in 1976 foreseeing retirement in ten years. He designed a house to see him through till the end. I came along in 1985 and saw no problems whatever. But it was split level, and up on a hill. Sixty-four steps separated garage from front door. By 1995, Donald's house on a hill was getting him down. It took us two years to decide to sell our dream home and another year to find a buyer. What about you?

If you're thinking about downsizing, you can choose among strata town houses and, for those, wanting a garden to call their own, there's Brinkworthy. But I know several people scattered around the island thinking maybe they've left it too long for those options. What they want is supportive or assisted living, there being nothing like having somebody else do the cooking, cleaning, and bed making. On Salt Spring Island, we have three choices:

Meadowbrook, 121 Atkins Road, operated by the Gulf Islands Seniors Residence Association (<http://meadowbrookssi.com/>), offers thirty-seven units: thirty-two are supportive and five are assisted living. This means caregivers come regularly to provide personal care under the aegis of Island Health. Meadowbrook has been full right from the start, and has a long waiting list.

Heritage Place, 120 Crofton Road, offers both Independent and Assisted Living for Seniors (<http://heritageplace.info/about-2/>). It offers independent and assisted living and specializes in dementia care and post-stroke and post-surgery rehabilitation. Medication management is delivered by certified staff. Its twenty-seven units are full and there's a growing waiting list.

Braehaven, 137 Blain Road, is operated by the Greenwoods Eldercare Society (<http://www.viha.ca/hcc/assisted/locations/braehaven.htm>). All of its units are subsidized with the tenant contribution determined by Island Health based on percentage of income. Tenants must have the cognitive capacity to direct their own care and respond appropriately in an emergency. Some suites are available now to clients deemed eligible by Island Health. Admission is by assessment (1.888.533.2273).

Braehaven has quality finishing and a great view of the harbour, but to live there you have to qualify for subsidized housing. Donna Regen (250-537-8340) has suggested that a few friends could join together and plan ahead to be residents of one of the two remaining pods that can be built on the Heritage Place site.

My friends at Meadowbrook keep telling me to get my name on their waiting list. "Maybe a suite will become available by the time you're in your eighties!" they joke. You could sign up too, but what if you don't want to wait "forever" like some of its current residents feel they had to do. So, the Gulf Islands Residents Association is considering whether to build a second Meadowbrook. They've approached Salt Spring Housing

Council and the Salt Spring Foundation to get support for a survey to assess the future housing needs of senior Islanders. What they're hoping for is scientifically-based data to help in planning.

The latest census figures say there are about 2,500 people on this island over age sixty-five, 780 of whom are over age eighty-five. In ten years, almost half our island population is expected to be over age sixty-five. If a survey taker should ask whether you would be interested in supportive living, will you dip your toes into fountains of youth, stick your head in the sand, and mumble, "I'm not ready yet"? Or will you realize that time flies, the future isn't far in the distance, and respond, "That's sounds interesting. What's involved?"