

What's state doing for seniors?

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For the next few months, state legislators will wrestle with Gov. Rick Snyder's proposed state budget and devote endless hours to determining the appropriate and affordable level of spending for education. That's well and good; schools and young people matter a great deal to Michigan's future.

You won't hear nearly as much discussion about Michigan's more immediate and foreseeable future, or about the fastest-growing segment of the state population: older people. Though Michigan's birthrate has been on a downslide since 1960, its over-50 population has been exploding. From 2000-10, the number of state residents ages 60-64 jumped almost 51%. Over the next 20 years, Oakland County's senior population is projected to double.

"Somebody starting up a business here who ignores the



RON DZWONKOWSKI SAYS FOCUS ON YOUTHS MUSTN'T BE AT EXPENSE OF ELDERS

realities of the population does so at their own peril," said Tom Jankowski, associate director of the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State University.

As does somebody holding or seeking public office.

Jankowski's doctoral thesis was on aging and political behavior. He concluded that older folks are indeed the most reliable voters, but not just because they have time to go the polls.

"They are among the most aware, because they read, and active reading is the best way to

learn about anything," he said. "They also are the most connected to their communities; they volunteer more, belong to service clubs. They understand and they care more — and not just about themselves, but about what the future holds for younger people."

But who's worrying about them?

Snyder has delivered special messages on talent, health, education and transportation. He has one coming up on crime.

What about elderly people? Haven't heard much since Snyder got his pension tax last year.

I write this after getting an earful from Jankowski and others at a recent regional forum on Michigan's growing senior population. I was invited because of a column I did calling attention to the rapid graying of Michigan and suggesting there was no future in it, that Michi-

THE OVER-65 POPULATION HAS INCOME OF \$37 BILLION, AND SPENDS 90% OF IT HERE.

gan needs to ramp up efforts to retain and attract young people.

We do; that's still true. But as Jankowski points out, that shouldn't come at the expense of a vital and growing segment of the population that doesn't demand attention but deserves it.

"At the federal level, Social Security and Medicare are key, and not just for them, but they want it protected for coming generations, too," Jankowski said.

"At the state level, we could be easing liability worries for institutions that would make more use of senior volunteers. On public transportation, we really don't offer a lot of options."

Jankowski also would like to

see school districts sign up for the Experience Corps program, in which senior volunteers become reading tutors. Grand Rapids is the only Michigan community now participating. The state, he said, also should expand in-home care programs for seniors who want to remain independent and make sure that seniors who qualify for food stamps are receiving them.

A study released last summer by the Gerontology Institute's Seniors Count! Project shows a third of the state's over-65 population survives on an income too low to meet basic needs.

And yet, Jankowski said, research also shows seniors are a huge segment of the Michigan economy, with the over-65 pop-

ulation having a combined income of \$37 billion, about 90% of which is spent directly in the state.

Knowing that, you'd think that every retail and service business in Michigan would institute a senior discount.

"The popular stereotype is that senior diners come early," Jankowski said. "Well, if you owned a restaurant, why wouldn't you want a full dining room at, say 4 o'clock, and then a younger crowd later?"

And from his research, Jankowski, 48, observed that "75% of seniors will demand their discount, and 25% will be offended if you offer it."

But then, I suspect, they'll take it. And they deserve it.

To learn more, go to <http://seniorscount.iog.wayne.edu>.

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