

**Peace River Regional District Seniors' Needs Project**

**Executive Summary Report**

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## Acknowledgements

From May 2006 to May 2007 the Peace River Regional District and the Community Development Institute at UNBC worked on a project to enhance the understanding of the housing and service needs of older residents. In the late Fall of 2006, a survey was circulated in the Regional District (outside of Fort St. John and Taylor, where an earlier survey had been completed). We would like to thank all those who took the time to complete and return the survey. Also, we would like to thank the community contacts who assisted in the distribution of the survey, including Mike Redfearn and Janine Disher of Chetwynd, Elaine Peterson of Dawson Creek, Mayor Lenore Harwood of Hudson's Hope, Peter Thomas of Pouce Coupe, and Roxanne Gale of Tumbler Ridge.

In the Winter of 2007, our research team visited Dawson Creek, Pouce Coupe, Tumbler Ridge, Chetwynd, Hudson's Hope, and rural areas of Electoral Areas B, C, D, and E of the Peace River Regional District. The research team conducted key informant interviews and roundtable discussions as part of the Peace River Regional District Seniors' Needs Project. We wish to thank all the residents, community groups, business members, service providers, policy makers, and municipal staff who took the time to help out and to participate in the interviews and roundtable discussions. Also, we would like to thank community contacts who assisted in the organization of the roundtable discussions, including Harold Borass, Barb Braun, Chris Broad, Darlene Campbell, Ian Campbell, Rose Colledge, Jill Copes, Elaine Ferguson, Doug Foerster, Marcie Fofonoff, Nicole Garbitt, Peter Kut, Annie Madden, Susan Michaud, Sharon Sullivan, John and Martha Wall, and Eleanor Wilfur. The response and enthusiasm demonstrates the importance of this issue within the region.

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## Availability

Copies of all reports associated with the Peace River Regional District Seniors' Needs Project are available in a number of locations. In Chetwynd, Dawson Creek, Fort St. John, Hudson's Hope, Pouce Coupe, Taylor, and Tumbler Ridge, copies are available at local municipal halls and public libraries. In Dawson Creek and Fort St. John, copies have been deposited with the Peace River Regional District offices. In Chetwynd, Dawson Creek, Hudson's Hope, and Pouce Coupe, copies have also been given to the local seniors' hall. At the University of Northern British Columbia, copies have been deposited at the Geoffrey R. Weller Library. Reports can also be accessed on the Community Development Institute website:

<http://www.unbc.ca/cdi/research.html>

## Project Reports

- Methodology Report
- Population Background and Trends Report
- Survey / Interview Report
- Roundtable Theme Report
- Executive Summary Report

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# Peace River Regional District Seniors' Needs Project Executive Summary Report

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## 1.0 Project Description

Since the 1980s, Canada's population has been aging. In small towns, the provision of housing, services, and facilities influences the decisions of individuals when choosing to retire in a community. In the Peace River Regional District, there were about 3,300 people over the age of 65 in 1991, but by 2001 there were about 4,350 people over age 65 (Statistics Canada, 1991; Statistics Canada, 2001). The increase in the number of older residents, and the increase in the number of residents who wish to remain in the region when they retire, have raised the level of interest in how the community, local services, and available housing options will meet the needs of a growing seniors' population. As a result, UNBC's Community Development Institute and the Peace River Regional District are working together to assess the needs of older residents.

The purpose of the Peace River Regional District Seniors' Needs Project is to examine housing and support service needs for seniors in the communities and rural areas of the region. The work was carried out by a research team from UNBC with the goal of providing local leaders with information relevant to decision-making regarding community planning and infrastructure investments. The project was carried out in the Fall of 2006 and Winter of 2007 (Table 1.1).

This report includes a summary of the key project components and findings, including details of the methodology, information from the population analysis, and results from the household survey, key informant interviews, and community roundtables.

**Table 1.1 Timeline**

<b>May – July 2006</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project application developed</li> <li>• Funding confirmed</li> <li>• Project Contribution Agreement confirmed</li> <li>• UNBC Research Ethics Board process completed</li> <li>• Research team established</li> </ul>
<b>August 2006</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevant local planning documents identified and obtained</li> <li>• Project logistics schedule completed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Field work</li> <li>○ Household survey</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>September 2006</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Draft household survey</li> <li>• Draft interview guides</li> <li>• Draft roundtable guides</li> </ul>
<b>October 2006</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of draft household survey and information letters by Project Advisory Group</li> <li>• Teleconference meeting with Project Advisory Group</li> </ul>
<b>November 2006</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiate household survey distribution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Rural mail out</li> <li>○ Municipal partnerships</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Construct survey databases (SPSS and WORD)</li> <li>• Media releases to publicize household survey</li> </ul>
<b>December 2006</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete household survey distribution</li> <li>• Household survey data entry begins</li> <li>• Finalize contacts for interviews and roundtables</li> </ul>
<b>January 2007</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Household survey data entry completed</li> <li>• Initiate population change report</li> <li>• Edit interview and roundtable guides</li> </ul>
<b>February 2007</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organize interviews and roundtables for assessment of seniors' needs</li> <li>• Preliminary analysis of household survey</li> <li>• Conduct key informant interviews</li> <li>• Conduct community roundtables</li> </ul>
<b>March 2007</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysis of interview and roundtable data</li> <li>• Complete population analysis</li> <li>• Complete interview and roundtable analysis</li> <li>• Complete survey analysis</li> </ul>
<b>April 2007</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete draft project reports</li> </ul>
<b>May 2007</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of draft project reports with Regional District and Project Advisory Group</li> <li>• Final reports completed and distributed</li> </ul>

## **2.0 Methodology**

The data and information for this project was collected through four methods. These included:

- a review of Census population data,
- a household survey,
- community roundtable discussions, and
- key informant interviews.

### ***Census data***

Using Census data, the analysis of the Peace River Regional District's population included the following issues:

- 1) the rates of population growth in the pre- and post-retirement age groups,
- 2) the rates of seniors' retention, as estimated by the age structure of the population over time and the number of seniors remaining in the community, and
- 3) an estimate of potential growth in the seniors' population based on the current age distribution of the population.

Population data were reported for the Peace River Regional District and the province of BC. Additionally, population data were reported for Chetwynd, Dawson Creek, Hudson's Hope. The goal is to give a range of contexts against which the changes can be compared. It should be noted that First Nations and aboriginal population data are generally undercounted in the Census.

### ***Research ethics***

Because we are a university-based research team, we are bound by standard protocol which identifies that all research conducted with people be sent to UNBC's Research Ethics Board for review and approval. The household survey, roundtable discussion guide, and interview guide each passed through this review.

### ***Household survey***

A household survey was administered with the assistance of the Peace River Regional District in November and December of 2006. In the municipalities, key contacts were made with local government to make arrangements for local distribution. In the rural areas, the Peace River Regional District mailed copies to rural residents using the property tax roll list that is prepared by BC Assessment, but managed by the Peace River Regional District. A total of 7,167 surveys were distributed, and 1,602 were completed and returned to UNBC. The response rate of 22.3% to a general mail out is considered quite good. The sampling error for the survey is between 3 and 5 percent, 19 times out of 20.

### ***Roundtable discussions***

A series of roundtable discussions were held between February 19<sup>th</sup> and February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2007. The purpose of the roundtable discussions was to collect information relevant to local communities, and to explore some of the preliminary survey results. The Peace River Regional Hospital District Board identified potential groups in the region that might want to be involved with roundtable discussions, and some key informant interviewees volunteered to arrange roundtable sessions. Roundtable participants were local residents, including seniors and those who are involved with and/or are aware of seniors' needs. A total of 20 roundtables were held.

### ***Key informant interviews***

Key informant interviews were conducted between February 19<sup>th</sup> and February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2007. The purpose of the interviews was to obtain views from people who are actively engaged in seniors' issues. Individuals from community groups, service provision agencies, and local government were selected from publicly available lists and from suggestions received from the Peace River Regional Hospital District Board. A total of 15 people were interviewed.



### 3.0 Population Background and Trends

In 1971, the population of the Peace River-Liard Regional District was about 44,000 people (Statistics Canada, 1971). In 1987, the Peace River-Liard Regional District was divided into the Peace River Regional District and the Northern Rockies Regional District. The Peace River Regional District retained most of the population from the Peace River-Liard Regional District, and has continued to grow. As of 2006, the population of the Peace River Regional District was over 58,250 people (Statistics Canada, 2006).

The Peace River Regional District still has a strong reliance on resource industries such as oil, natural gas, forestry, and agriculture. Difficulties in the forest industry over the late 1990s and early 2000s have had a limiting influence on population growth. To balance this, increased oil and gas activity has contributed to population growth in the region.

While the current seniors' population of the Peace River Regional District is not significantly large, the pending retirement of a large group of older workers will change this. Using a range of retention rate scenarios, we can estimate that the Peace River Regional District has the potential to add between 2,855 (low estimate) and 3,185 (high estimate) 'new' seniors between 2001 to 2011. This coming retirement 'bubble' will put considerable pressure on seniors' services and facilities. While much of this seniors' population will still be among the 'young elderly', others will start to require a greater level of housing, support, and health services.

#### *Population growth*

The population of the Peace River Regional District has grown by about 14,250 people from 1971 to 2006 (Table 3.1a). In most periods, the Regional District has experienced growth, with the key exception of the 1996 to 2001 period. Despite periods of population loss, the Peace River Regional District grew by over 32% from 1971 to 2006. As of the 2006 Census, the Peace River Regional District recorded its largest population.

**Table 3.1a Population Counts, Peace River RD & BC, 1971-2006**

Year	Peace River RD	BC
1971	43,996*	2,184,621
1976	44,842*	2,392,790
1981	55,463*	2,744,467
1986	57,278*	2,883,367
1991	53,317	3,282,061
1996	56,477	3,724,500
2001	55,080	3,907,738
2006	58,264	4,113,487

Source: Statistics Canada.

\* In 1987, the Peace River-Liard Regional District was divided to create the Northern Rockies Regional District and the Peace River Regional District. The numbers here represent the Peace River-Liard Regional District at the time.

When considering the municipalities of the Peace River Regional District, they have all experienced periods of growth and decline since 1971 (Table 3.1b). Interestingly, Dawson Creek and Hudson’s Hope recorded their highest population counts in 1971. However, Chetwynd has more than doubled its population since 1971. Tumbler Ridge recorded its highest population count in 1991, but experienced a large change as a result of coal mine closures and openings.

**Table 3.1b Population Counts, Peace River Municipalities, 1971-2006**

Year	Chetwynd	Dawson Creek	Hudson’s Hope	Pouce Coupe	Tumbler Ridge
1971	1,260	11,885	1,740	595	--
1976	1,487	10,528	1,330	776	--
1981	2,553	11,373	1,365	824	3
1986	2,774	10,544	1,158	813	4,387
1991	2,845	10,980	985	830	4,650
1996	2,980	11,125	1,120	895	3,775
2001	2,591	10,754	1,039	833	1,851
2006	2,633	10,994	1,012	739	2,454

Source: Statistics Canada.

### *Population age structure*

Over time, the age structure of the Peace River Regional District population has changed. In the 1980s, the population was mostly comprised of young families with children, as young families were drawn to the region for work opportunities in an expanding resource sector (in this case, mining, and oil and gas industries). By 2001, the trend towards population aging was pronounced in the Regional District, as there were fewer young families, and the share of the population over the age of 40 increased.

The municipalities within the Peace River Regional District generally follow the same trends as the Regional District; however, there are a few exceptions. Pouce Coupe and Tumbler Ridge have demonstrated greater proportions of seniors than would be expected. In both of these cases, seniors have migrated to the community for available housing. Hudson’s Hope and Dawson Creek are also unique in that they have demonstrated an older workforce since 1981 – at time when most other municipalities in the Peace River Regional District generally had young families with children.

Looking at the seniors’ population between 1971 and 2001 in the Peace River Regional District, the percent of the population over the age of 65 has grown from about 4% to 8%. In the same time period, the province of BC has experienced an increase in its senior’s population from 9% to 13%. However, the percent of the population over the age of 65 in the Peace River Regional District has almost doubled in this time period, whereas the population over the age of 65 in BC

has increased by almost one-third. This indicates that population aging is occurring faster in the Peace River Regional District than in BC.

Most of the municipalities within the Peace River Regional District follow the regional trend of increasing percentage of seniors. However, in Tumbler Ridge, the increase has been much more recent due to the town’s inception in 1981. As discussed above, the high percentage of seniors in Pouce Coupe and Tumbler Ridge is affected by in-migration for housing. Beyond Pouce Coupe and Tumbler Ridge, Hudson’s Hope has also seen a significant increase in the proportion of seniors since 1971. In this case, it may be more reflective of an out-migration of some people within the working age population. However, increases in the senior population to date have been modest compared to what will occur over the next 15 years as local aging-in-place results in a large number of ‘baby boom’ workers who will be retiring soon.

Many resource industry regions across northern BC are experiencing a process called “resource frontier aging”. In this case, an established workforce faced with limited new employment growth will age-in-place over time.<sup>1</sup> As shown in Table 3.2a, the percent of the workforce over the age of 45 years in the Peace River Regional District has increased since 1981. In 1981, just over 20% of the workforce was over the age of 45. By 2001, over 31% of the workforce was over the age of 45. Again, the pace of aging is greater in the Peace River Regional District than for the province of BC. This ‘nearing retirement’ population will be important because of the different housing and service needs as older residents.

**Table 3.2a Percent Workforce Aged 45 Years and Older, Peace River RD & BC, 1971-2001**

Year	Peace River RD	BC
1971	23.3	31.7
1976	23.3	30.4
1981	20.6	28.9
1986	22.8	29.2
1991	25.1	29.8
1996	27.0	25.0
2001	31.3	36.7

Source: Statistics Canada.

Similar to the trend experienced in the Regional District and in BC, most municipalities within the Peace River Regional District have experienced an overall increase in the percentage of the workforce aged 45 years and older since 1971 (Table 3.2b). Hudson’s Hope has had a 21.2% increase in the percent of the workforce over the age of 45 – the greatest increase in all of the Peace River Regional District.

<sup>1</sup> ‘Workforce’ is defined as the population between the ages of 15 and 64 years.

**Table 3.2b Percent Workforce Aged 45 Years and Older, Peace River Municipalities, 1971-2001**

Year	Chetwynd	Dawson Creek	Hudson's Hope	Pouce Coupe	Tumbler Ridge
1971	20.1	24.7	22.6	31.4	--
1976	18.9	26.1	24.4	31.5	--
1981	17.3	23.6	26.1	25.0	--
1986	17.2	25.4	30.6	27.4	10.7
1991	19.7	26.0	36.2	30.0	15.6
1996	20.5	27.3	40.5	29.7	21.9
2001	25.8	31.8	43.8	34.8	42.9

Source: Statistics Canada.

### ***Retention rates***

The preceding included information on how the Peace River Regional District's population has changed, and how there is a 'bubble' of older workers approaching retirement. This part of the population summary estimates the potential growth in the Peace River Regional District's senior population. To do this, we have calculated potential retention rates for the retiring population and created high, medium, and low estimates for how many older residents may stay in the region after they retire.

Retention rate estimates were based on historical patterns in the Regional District. For example, between 1991 and 2001 about 73% of those people who were 55 to 64 years of age in 1991 seemed to have stayed in the region by 2001 as a population aged 65 to 74. Based on such past patterns, we came up with a range of estimates of the potential retirement population looking towards the year 2011. The three scenarios are:

- a low estimate using the 65% retention rate experienced in the Peace River Regional District between 1971 to 1981,
- a mid-range estimate using the nearly 69% average retention rate experienced by the Peace River Regional District between 1971 and 2001, and
- a high estimate of nearly 73% retention rate experienced in the Peace River Regional District between 1991 and 2001.

In 2001, there were already about 4,345 seniors (age 65 and over) in the Peace River Regional District. Using the three retention scenarios, we can estimate that the Regional District could have between 2,855 and 3,185 additional seniors, or between 65% and 74% growth by 2011 (Table 3.3). The future growth of seniors will be significant in the Peace River Regional District, and given the trend of services being available in regional centres, rural seniors will have to travel to use services and facilities.

**Table 3.3 Estimate of Potential Growth of Seniors:  
Peace River Regional District, 2001-2011**

Potential Growth Rate	# of expected seniors
High	3,184
Mid	3,021
Low	2,855

Source: Statistics Canada.

High estimate based on 72.6% retention.

Mid-range estimate based on 68.9% retention.

Low estimate based on 65.1% retention.

Municipal retention rate data are not included in the discussion for three reasons: (1) in-migration from surrounding rural areas is a significant issue at the municipal level, (2) the small size of a number of the participating municipalities makes estimates less reliable, and (3) the large changes that have occurred in some of the municipalities similarly makes estimates less reliable.

## 4.0 Survey Report Findings

Building from the increased interest across the Peace River Region about how the communities, local services, and available housing options will meet the needs of the growing seniors' population, a mail-out survey was sent to households across the Regional District in order to collect information on their views and opinions (an earlier study had just been completed in Fort St. John and Taylor with the result that they were not included in this current study). The household survey was carried out in the fall of 2006. A total of 7,167 surveys were distributed, with a response rate of 22.3%. A copy of the household survey can be found in the Methodology Report. When interpreting the results, it is important to keep in mind that responses were from a sample of the local population and that the 'sampling error' for the survey is between 3 and 5%. In sharing the results, the analysis also probed responses by 'community', 'age', 'rurality', 'pension access', 'length of residency', and 'plans to retire locally'.

Over three-quarters of respondents were married, while almost one-quarter were single, separated, divorced or widowed. By age, nearly two-thirds of respondents were 64 years of age and under. Most survey respondents were female, and most had lived in the Peace River area for a long time. Most respondents still relied on income generated from employment and had household incomes above \$40,000 per year.

Housing was a key issue for older residents. Most respondents owned their dwelling, while a small percentage rented. Older households in large dwellings faced a number of challenges including the cost of heat, maintenance, and property taxes. Stairs can be a risk and barrier for older households, and about two-thirds of respondents said there were stairs at the main entrance to the house, while one-fifth reported stairs between the living area and the bedrooms. One positive note is that most respondents reported that their dwelling was in good condition and needed only regular maintenance.

When asked about the types of housing needed to meet the needs of older residents, most supported housing with modest levels of assistance (independent living, assisted living, and intermediate living). There was also strong demand for long-term care facilities, respite care, and palliative care facilities. When asked about who should build seniors' housing, responsibility largely fell to the provincial and federal governments, with contributions from the municipal government and the individuals living in the housing. When asked about who should maintain seniors' housing, the provincial government was identified as the key player, with contributions expected from the federal government, the municipal government, and the individuals living in the housing.

Seniors' transportation and mobility issues are important as they not only affect basic daily needs, but also quality of life and personal safety. While most of the respondents travelled by personal car or truck, some also relied upon family/friends and walking. This wide use of personal vehicles means that road and sidewalk maintenance (general and winter) is especially important. As the population ages, support seems to be moving towards increasing the use of HandyDART, bus, and taxi service to help people move within their community.

Community participation and local service provision are critical parts of planning for older residents. The survey respondents are active people, often belonging to two or more local clubs or organizations. Such activity needs to be sustained as it contributes to social networks, health and quality of life. Changes in such local participation, such as physical limitations and aging, reinforce a need to look closely at local access and transportation. In terms of local facilities, most of those listed in the survey scored positively. However, seniors' housing had the lowest satisfaction rating. In terms of local services, churches scored very positively, while a range of other clubs and services also scored well.

When asked if their community needs a housing complex for older residents, nearly every respondent supported the need. When asked, the majority of respondents also felt that a seniors' activity centre was needed in their community. The benefits provided by these centres/activities are many and they play a key role in maintaining quality of life, healthy lifestyles, and assisting with the provision of care. In some cases, an activity centre may be combined with a housing/recreation complex, while in other cases it may be a separate facility. When asked about what kind of activities a centre should provide, most suggestions focussed on health and wellness activities and daily/weekly special events. When asked about the services to help older residents maintain their health and wellness, respondents identified those which help older residents remain healthy and in their own homes.

Winter weather, especially snow and ice, were identified as the key barriers to seniors moving about their communities. Sidewalk issues, long distances, concerns over safety, and loose gravel on roads and walkways were also noted.

Family and social networks are critical for seniors to obtain support and care when needed. The results suggest that older residents were able to draw upon a high level of support from family and friends living in the community. Most respondents felt that it was the presence of these family or close friendship ties that made them want to stay in the community. At present, very few respondents reported needing assistance, but for those that did, most of the support was for basic activities of daily living, including house maintenance, housecleaning, driving to errands, and grocery shopping. Most of this assistance came from family and friends, and was in response to long-term health or physical limitations.

Most of the people who answered the survey were not yet retired. These people were aware of the advantages and disadvantages of retiring locally. Of those who were not retired, just over half were planning to retire in the area. This supports the Population Report suggestion that the local seniors' population is poised for growth. For those who were not sure if they would retire locally, it seems that the absence of family/friend networks underscores this uncertainty. The cost of living will also be a major consideration in determining whether residents will retire locally.

Respondents were also asked about advantages/disadvantages with respect to retiring in the area. Key amongst the advantages was the presence of family and close friends. Also important were familiarity with the community and the benefits of living in a small community. Key disadvantages include climate (underscoring again the need to attend to infrastructure like roads/sidewalks/building entrances), inadequate medical services, housing, and perceptions about high costs of living.

Financial security is one of the central issues for seniors and the final part of the survey asked about access to pension plans. Nearly all respondents were covered by the Canada Pension Plan and about half reported that they have Old Age Security and/or some form of personal RRSP/RIF. RRSPs were more common among those under 55 years of age, while OAS was more common among long-term and older residents. Just under half of retired respondents reported that they could draw benefits from more than one pension. A potential problem came up when very few respondents reported that their pension plans would cover medical travel and expenses. The results reinforce suggestions about the need for seniors' housing, improved access to local health services geared to an older population, and regional shuttle service to facilitate access to a range of needed services.



## 5.0 Theme Report Findings

Questions that gauge participants' opinions about existing housing, services, and infrastructure were asked in the roundtable discussion (see Methodology Report, Appendix B). In the roundtable discussion, participants were shown preliminary survey results and some of the discussion questions asked participants to identify what they felt were the *most important* issues from the preliminary survey results. The Roundtable Theme Report draws mostly upon the prioritized responses, but all responses are considered (for greater detail, please see the Roundtable Theme Report). This part of the report provides a summary of the main themes that emerged from each section of questions at the roundtable discussions.

Each section of the roundtable guide is addressed in the following discussion independently, but linkages exist between sections due to the integration of various services. For example, some comments in the health care section relate to medical transportation, and some comments in the housing section relate to the provision of community health support services. As a result, related issues sometimes emerge in different sections.

Comments made by respondents reflect the influences of both 'design issues' and 'aging issues'. Most city/town design and planning across North America is based upon land use separation and low density developments. Different types of land uses are then joined by road networks for automobile accessibility. The outcomes of low density developments are noticed more as seniors and older residents have to traverse long distances to services and activities.

### *Migration and mobility*

In order to assess factors that may influence migration and retention of residents, participants were asked to describe advantages and disadvantages of retiring in the area. Participants identified access to social networks, the benefits of small town living, and environmental assets as being the prioritized advantages of retiring in the Peace River region. Participants identified high transportation costs, limited availability of transportation services, limited availability of health care services, and physical barriers to mobility (i.e. poor road maintenance and lack of snow and ice removal) as being the prioritized disadvantages of retiring in the region.

### *Housing*

In order to get a sense of the housing needs in the area, roundtable participants were asked what types of housing are needed. Most groups felt that independent living units and assisted living units are the top priorities. Comments also arose with respect to problems associated with existing seniors' housing, such as a seniors' housing shortage, confusion about provincially provided care facilities, and financial barriers to securing seniors' housing.

Participants provided a number of comments and suggestions about the development, building, and operation of seniors' housing in the Peace River Regional District. Participants drew examples from housing complexes that exist in other communities and felt that the private sector should work in conjunction with the provincial government and the non-profit sector to develop seniors' housing. There was also agreement that there is a need for increased access to funding

by non-governmental groups to develop, build, and operate seniors' housing.

Participants provided a number of comments and suggestions about the design and location of seniors' housing in the Peace River Regional District. First, a range of design features to enhance residents' quality of life and to accommodate those with limited or declining mobility are needed. Participants also noted that a range of services are also needed to support independent living. Regarding location, most participants felt that it would be beneficial to have seniors' housing located near services. Rural participants felt that independent living facilities for rural seniors should be located in rural areas, but that increased levels of care (i.e. long-term care) should be located in larger municipalities within the Peace River region to be closer to services.

### ***Health care***

Participants were asked to assess how they felt the health care system responded to seniors' needs. Notably, participants were asked to identify the most useful health care services currently provided to seniors, and the most critical health care service needs of seniors.

When participants were asked about how the health care system responds to seniors' needs, prominent issues that emerged concerned the availability of services, the quality of services, and how the health care system is operated. Participants noted that there is a general lack of health care services available to seniors in the region, that they have received inadequate quality health care, and that the system does not respond sufficiently to the needs of seniors. Participants also noted that program cutbacks, lack of funding, inadequate management, and limited accountability from health care service providers and the provincial government contributed to operational problems. One roundtable group argued that rural health system structures should not be based on models intended for urban centres.

Regarding the most useful health care services provided to area seniors, four primary themes emerged. Many positive comments were offered about how health care providers respond to the needs of area seniors. Participants also noted that specialists in the area are key health care service providers for seniors. Additionally, participants felt that community health support services contribute to the well-being of seniors in the Peace River region. Emergency services were also identified as important health care services. When asked about the critical health care needs of seniors in the area, five prominent themes arose. These included the need for more health care professionals, specialists, transportation services, emergency services, and community health support services. Participants provided a number of comments and suggestions about potential improvements to the health care system, specifically regarding funding distribution and operations. Support was expressed for more funding to be allocated to health care, particularly for rural outreach services.

### ***Services***

In order to assess how to help seniors maintain their health and independence, roundtable participants were asked to identify which services are needed most. Overwhelmingly,

participants identified that social support services are needed. Some participants also identified home maintenance services, food services, and transportation services as priority services that are needed to help seniors maintain their health and independence. Participants also noted a number of problems associated with the delivery of support services. Concerns about a lack of support services, financial barriers, and regulatory barriers were the most frequent problems identified. Primarily, participants were concerned about a lack of home support services and a lack of services to help familial caregivers.

In order to assess space availability for seniors' recreation and leisure services, roundtable participants were asked if a seniors' activity centre is needed in their community. Most participants noted that a seniors' activity centre is not needed in their community, or that space for seniors' recreation and leisure is already available. However, participants from some rural areas and Tumbler Ridge thought that their communities need a seniors' activity centre. Most rural participants felt that a seniors' activity centre should be located in a rural area to retain seniors. Some participants thought that a seniors' activity centre in a rural area should be combined with seniors' housing or located near other services to create a central place for seniors. In order to understand what types of activities and services a seniors' activity centre should provide, participants were asked to identify those they felt were most needed. Participants noted five prominent activities that are needed, including health programs, physical activities, special events, food programs, and games.

### ***Transportation***

To get a sense of how seniors' mobility is enhanced or limited by transportation services, roundtable participants were asked what they felt were the key transportation needs for area seniors inside and outside of their communities. Participants indicated that they need a range of transportation services inside the community, such as informal transportation providers, public transportation, transportation provided by community organizations and service clubs, and private transportation. Regarding transportation needs outside the community, participants felt that public transportation for medical services and general purpose private transportation are seniors' greatest needs. Most participants agreed that the Northern Health Connections bus service is beneficial for those who have to travel within and outside of the region for health services. However, concerns were raised about a lack of medical evacuation service in the region.

### ***Physical environment***

In order to understand seniors' mobility within their communities and in the region, roundtable participants were asked to identify physical barriers that prohibit mobility for seniors. Participants felt that snow and ice accumulation, design problems with municipal infrastructure and public and private sector buildings, and traffic safety concerns are barriers that prevent seniors from walking around their community. In order to improve mobility and accessibility, participants offered recommendations to improve municipal and rural infrastructure, building design, and snow and ice removal. For example, increasing the number of sidewalks and crosswalks, paving improvements and widening roads, and the installation of automatic doors and elevators would assist seniors' mobility.

## *Concluding comments*

The purpose of the roundtable theme report has been to highlight some of the dominant themes that resulted from discussions held in February 2007 as part of the Peace River Regional District Seniors' Needs Project. These themes, together with the nuances captured in Appendix A of the Roundtable Theme Report, can form the basis both for action now, and for future planning.

As a report for the Regional District, the municipalities, service providers, and the voluntary sector of the Peace River region, there are a number of issues which fall into different jurisdictions. While some topics may become advocacy points to raise with different levels of government, others can be addressed now. To this end, we have included some possible areas for action:

**Housing** – Seniors' housing shortages in the Peace River region need to be addressed. With the onset of an older population and residents already feeling that there is a shortage, investments need to be made to develop and build seniors' housing. Innovation can play a role in providing multiple levels of care within a facility. In doing so, partnerships should be explored between various levels of government, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector to develop, build, and/or operate seniors' housing. In this process, the affordability of seniors' housing should be considered given the high demand in the housing rental market. Ensuring that affordable seniors' housing is available prevents the marginalization of seniors in economic boom periods.

**Social support services** – There is a need for increased provision of supports in the homes of seniors and older residents. Formal service and care provision is becoming less able to meet the needs of an aging population in the Peace River region. Given this, gaps in care provision and other critical services for seniors are being taken up by the voluntary sector and other informal networks (i.e. family and friends). This relates to how participants noted that access to social networks is a prioritized advantage to retiring in the area. The Regional District and/or the communities need to find ways to assist voluntary and service groups to carry out such tasks (i.e. facilitate networking and partnerships). Given the role of informal care providers in providing services, support for these groups will contribute considerably to local quality of life. These services are needed in rural and urban areas alike.

**Health care** – There is a need for increased flexibility in the provision of health care in rural areas. Provincial benchmarking does not address the unique service delivery challenges faced by rural and small town places, nor does it recognize place-based differences in service utilization. By considering flexible provision of rural health care, pressures can be removed from provincial health care services – which can be difficult to provide in areas of low population density. However, liability concerns and qualification standards for health care provision must be considered.

**Transportation networks** – Residents' concerns about air evacuation in the region need to be addressed. With regionalized health care services in the Peace River Regional District,

emergency services should be available to fill service gaps. In addition to emergency services, general purpose transportation networks within the region need to be assessed to provide access to regional service centres. This service is important to seniors in rural areas and communities outside of the regional service centres. Also, transportation for seniors and older residents must be affordable due to low and fixed incomes, and to accommodate that the high costs of transportation are a disadvantage to retiring in the Peace River region.

**Physical environment** – There is a need to implement maintenance and safety improvements regarding snow and ice removal, and traffic on highways and local streets. Special considerations should be taken to ensure that hindrances to seniors’ mobility are mitigated through improvements to sidewalks, safe crossing areas, and snow clearing in areas of high utilization, as this was identified as a disadvantage to retiring in the Peace River region. Additionally, improved road maintenance in the rural areas facilitates rural seniors’ independence. Following concerns raised about industrial encroachment and traffic safety, seniors’ mobility is being impacted through the presence of industrial activity in the region.

**Infrastructure and planning** – The allocation of services and facilities should be assessed regionally, as there is value in creating ‘clustered’ developments in urban and rural areas where any number of services (i.e. housing, medical, recreational, shopping, and social) are brought together. In creating higher density developments, increased convenience is provided to less mobile populations. Additionally, the renovation of existing facilities, and the addition of new facilities, must meet accessibility requirements of older residents.

The response and enthusiasm that the Peace River Regional District Seniors’ Needs Project received while the research was being executed demonstrates the importance of seniors’ needs within the region. Most of the Peace River region now has a ‘bubble’ of older workers nearing retirement. There is a need to start planning for the housing, service, care, and infrastructure needs of this aging population. By starting now, the Regional District, municipalities, service providers, and voluntary sectors of the Peace River region have time to prepare for how they will meet these needs of an older population in the near future.

## **Additional Sources of Information**

### **Fort St. John Seniors' Needs Project (2006)**

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### **Terrace and Area Seniors' Needs Project (2006)**

Halseth, G., L. Ryser, C. Martin, and N. Hanlon. 2006. *Terrace and Area Seniors' Needs Project: Executive Summary Report*. Prince George, BC: Community Development Institute, UNBC. Available online:  
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Halseth, G., N. Hanlon, V. Pow, and R. Clasby. 2004. *"Looking to the Future, Now" Mackenzie and Area Seniors' Needs Project: Executive Summary*. Prince George, BC: Community Development Institute, UNBC. Available online:  
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