

The kids gone, aging Baby Boomers opt for city life

By [Tara Bahrapour](#)

August 9, 2013

Robert Solymossy doesn't remember when he last gassed up his one remaining car. His other two cars are blissfully consigned to memory, along with his lawn, his driveway and "a lifetime's worth of furniture" accumulated over the 23 years he lived in a detached single-family house in a wooded part of Oakton.

In 2005, Solymossy, now 67, and his wife Diana Sun Solymossy, 58, traded all that in to live in a condo in Clarendon with a gym, a rooftop pool and dozens of shops and restaurants right downstairs.

They bought it unbuilt, choosing from a floor plan. "It was a leap of faith, to say the least, but the location was really good," Solymossy said. "After we moved in, I realized that this is really, really great; this really rocks."

The Solymossys were front-runners of a mini-trend now taking root in some parts of the nation and particularly in the Washington metro area: baby boomers swapping out their single-family suburban homes for the bustle of urban life.

Reversing the trajectory of the Eisenhower generation, which fled cities for the suburbs, these boomers are following a path that younger people have [embraced in droves](#). Many are empty nesters, and freed of the need to factor in school districts and yard sizes, they are gravitating to dense urban cores near restaurants, shops, movie theaters and Metro stations.

Between 2000 and 2010, more than a million baby boomers moved out of areas 40 to 80 miles from city centers and a similar number moved to within five miles of city centers, according to an analysis of 50 large cities by the online real estate brokerage Redfin.

[While a 2010 AARP survey](#) showed that 85 percent of people 50 to 64 prefer to stay in their current residences, the percentage decreases with income, a relevant detail in the Washington region where household income is double the national median. And those who move increasingly want to live where they can walk and bike to amenities.

"The millennials and the boomers are looking for the same thing," said Amy Levner, manager of AARP's Livable Communities.

[Surveys](#) of boomers' preferences show that they are more interested in "smart growth" areas than in sprawl.

“This is just the tip of it,” she said.

Chris Leinberger, a professor at the George Washington University School of Business and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said that while comprehensive data won't be available for another decade, the shift toward urban living is “the largest social trend of the early 21st century.” Although boomers aren't driving it, he said, some are jumping on.

The boomers' generation had forged a more extreme version of suburban life than their parents had — adding to the burdens of home and garden care and commuting, Leinberger said. “The baby boomers' lots are much bigger and they moved further out,” he said. “They're tired of mowing their lawn; it takes sweat equity, or you have to write a check to someone to do it.”

Real estate agents around the metro area say they are noticing a change. Rick Bosl, an agent with Keller Williams Realty who specializes in the condo-rich Orange Line corridor in Arlington, said around a quarter of his clients are boomers. “They want a level living area; they're tired of stairs,” he said. “And it's close to the city.”

Male-female split

To be sure, there are trade-offs. When Ricki and Lee Peltzman, both 64, left a single-family house in Bethesda to live in the District's Chinatown, they whittled down their square footage by two-thirds, which meant giving up some treasured art and books. “My husband came down here kicking and screaming,” said Peltzman. But “he didn't have to take care of the house. . . . I was tired of working all day, having a 45-minute commute and then coming home and taking care of the house. It was too much.”

Now, the couple goes out two or three nights a week, walking across the street to go to dinner or the movies.

A male-female split is common among urban migrant boomers, said Adam Ducker, managing director of RCLCO, a real estate advisory firm in Bethesda.

“Women seem proportionally more interested in the move than men, with the woman saying, ‘I'm sick of this, I'm doing all the work and all the worry,’” he said.

Another obstacle is cost, especially for boomers, who tend to prefer large condos with two or more bedrooms, which are more scarce than smaller ones.

When they do find them, many face sticker shock: the median price nationally for a condo or co-op has risen 15.4 percent since last year, according to the National Association of Realtors.

Prices in the Washington-area suburbs have not risen as quickly as in its urban cores. Whereas two decades ago it cost more per square foot to move to the suburbs than to the city, that trend has now reversed, Leinberger said.

Condos in some parts of Arlington and the District can sell for up to \$1,000 a square foot, locking out many middle-class people.

“When they do the math, it’s, ‘Gee, I thought I was moving down; I seem to be moving up,’” Ducker said.

‘A regeneration’

When Harold and Betsi Closter sold their four-bedroom Cape Cod in Annandale to move to a two-bedroom condo on Fourth Street and Massachusetts Avenue NW, “It was pretty much a wash, but this has allowed us to get rid of one of our cars and we feel good about having reduced our carbon footprint,” said Harold Closter, 63.

The new location has also been good for their health and their social life; the couple walks regularly to Capitol Hill, U Street and Georgetown, and they have met people involved in the arts, local government and small businesses.

“The spirit on the streets, there’s a kind of vitality, a regeneration,” Harold Closter said, adding that most people in their building are younger than they are. “We’ve made a lot of new friends, and we’ve found that it’s a lot easier for our friends to get to us, because we’re right on the Metro. . . . Our (adult) son and his friends think this is pretty cool as well.”

For some, city life does not necessarily mean a sleek new condo. Marcia and David Hoexter initially moved to U Street NW after raising their kids in Vienna, but ultimately they decided on a 125-year-old rowhouse in Capitol Hill, in walking distance from restaurants and shops at Barracks Row, Eastern Market, and H Street.

“We have more . . . living space than we did in the condo,” said Marcia Hoexter, 62. “We have a patio, and we can walk out the door and be in Lincoln Park.”

Now, she said, the only time they drive is “when we go out to Virginia to visit our friends.”

The Solymossys had to kick in some extra money to buy their condo, but they ended up liking it so much they bought another to rent out.


Most of their neighbors in the 419-unit mid-rise are half Solymossy’s age, but not all. “When we first moved in, I didn’t see anybody who had gray hair; most were young kids,” he said. “But let’s fast forward — now I see guys my age in the gym. . . . I’m sure that a lot more people are starting to make such a move because I think people are fed up with the commutes.”

Sitting on his terrace with his wife, the Washington Monument and Washington National Cathedral rising above the treeline in the distance, Solymossy grinned.

“I don’t have to spend my time taking care of the house, replacing the gutter, sealing the driveway,” he said. “After you make the move, it’s like a big rock lifted off the back of your neck.”

 **47 Comments**

Tara Bahrapour

Tara Bahrapour, a staff writer based in Washington, D.C., writes about aging, generations and demography. She has also covered immigration and education and has reported from the Middle East and North Africa, and from the republic of Georgia. Follow 

Get a year of access for \$29. Cancel at any time.

Get this offer now

Already a subscriber? **Sign in**