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Gay Senior Housing on the Rise, While Straights Cry Foul

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Two planned developments on either end of Massachusetts — the Stonewall at Audubon Circle in Boston's Fenway area and Paradise One in Easthampton — are pioneering condo complexes marketed to older gay and lesbian residents.

But what seems like a great idea—giving aging gay and lesbian seniors a place where they can live and be open—has found criticism from local politicians and some real estate groups. Massachusetts Rep. Brian Wallace (D-South Boston), calls the approval of gay senior housing developments a double standard, according to a report in the *Boston Herald*.

Wallace claims Southie (South Boston) has tried time and again to win City Hall's blessing to build housing targeted at neighborhood seniors, only to be told by city development officials that it would run afoul of fair housing laws.

"You can do this for one group, and not another?" asked Wallace. "It's pushing the envelope to a drastic point," he said.

"What if I was saying this building is just for heterosexual people, or Muslims, or Jews or Catholics. What's the difference?," Michael Carucci, head of ERA Boston Real Estate Group, told the paper. "To take it the next step and say this building is just for gay people - it's a bit much," said Carucci.

Critics like Carucci and Wallace perhaps miss the point, and the very necessity for gay elder housing, because they haven't felt the sting of a lifetime of discrimination over something as basic and intrinsic as sexual orientation.

"No one wants to feel uncomfortable or have to censor themselves or be afraid when they get old anymore," Garry Daffin, who has worked on gay issues in Boston, told the paper.

Gay baby boomers nearing retirement understand the problems all too well, having spent much or some of their lives in the closet. They remember having to keep their private lives private to keep their jobs, their homes, even their children.

There's legitimate fear, said David Aronstein of Stonewall Communities, about having to climb back in the closet should their health deteriorate, their physical freedom decline, and they need home care, assisted living or a nursing home.

"How come you don't ask why golfers want to live in golf communities? says Joy Silver, CEO of RainBow Vision Properties, which has operated both a condo community and an assisted living complex for gays and lesbians for a year now in Santa Fe, and is planning one for Palm Springs.

The MetLife Mature Market Institute's recent "Out and Aging" report on gay and lesbian boomers found that one in three worry they'll face discrimination because of their sexual orientation when

they become old and require care.

"Most long-term care facilities operate under a sort of 'don't ask, don't tell' policy where gay seniors are expected to conceal their identities," Amber Hollibaugh, strategist for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, told the *Dallas Morning News*. "Those who don't follow the unwritten rule face ostracism or worse."

Gay men and lesbians are just the newest niche in a booming retirement housing market that, contrary to Rep. Wallace's contention, already includes developments catering to Asian-Americans, the deaf, golfing enthusiasts, military veterans and university alumni.

In fact, 21 gay and lesbian retirement communities from Washington state to Florida are under construction or on the drawing board, according to the American Society on Aging.

Why so many? The baby boomer generation is propelling their development. The number of gay Americans over 65 will more than double in the next 25 years, from an estimated 3-7 million, according to projections by the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**.

Sante Fe's Rainbow Vision, a 13-acre development of adobe buildings, is among the first project to offer a broad range of retirement living choices - from 120 residences for active adults to 26 assisted-living suites for frail seniors. Since the development opened in June, 60 people from across the country have bought or leased residences.

Aegis Living of Redmond, Wash., operates 40 communities, but its Fountaingrove Lodge in Santa Rosa, Calif., is its first venture in the gay retirement market.

"We're an entrepreneurial company," Wes Winter, the project's marketing director, told the *Dallas Morning News*. "We had built a community for Asian-Americans, so we were already in a niche frame of mind when a group of gay professionals approached us with the idea."

The group of physicians and college professors from the San Francisco area provided the community connections, while Aegis Living had the development experience and the access to \$85 million in capital. Winter said the 148-unit community will open in Northern California's wine country by 2009 and offer the equivalent of "cruise ship living."

About 23 people have put down \$1,000 deposits for one of roughly 60 units in the Boston Fenway development where units will sell from \$400,000 to \$700,000.

David Aronstein, whose Stonewall Communities is marketing the Fenway complex, is exploring the possibility of condo projects for aging gays and lesbians in Boston's suburbs, as well as in other New England cities such as Providence.

"The gay vocabulary hasn't included the word old, but that's about to change," Jim LeCroy, vice president of Dallas' Silver Hope Project, a Dallas-based gay retirement development, told the *Dallas* paper. "Many of us are getting older, and we'll need a place where we can feel safe."