

The Winchester Star <http://www.winchesterstar.com/>

Life made less taxing Fixing homes for seniors has never made more cents

By VAL VAN METER

WINCHESTER — Facing an “age wave” in the state, Virginia’s General Assembly in January increased the Livable Home Tax Credit it offers to builders or individuals who outfit homes with features to make them more accessible for owners and visitors, especially senior citizens and the handicapped.

The credit jumped from \$2,000 to \$5,000 for the 2011 tax year. Individuals can claim credit for half the cost of refitting an existing home, up to the \$5,000 limit, said Kathy Robertson, associate director for housing for the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development.

On new homes, either the builder or the buyer can apply for the tax credit, but not both, she said.

“It’s going on here,” said Realtor Jeff Webber of Long and Foster-Webber Associates.

More builders are constructing homes with wider doors, halls and bathrooms to accommodate wheelchairs, he said. Other qualifying accessories include zero- step entrances, accessible light switches and electrical outlets, environmental controls and kitchen facilities, as well as grab bars in bathrooms.

For 2011, Robertson said, legislators put a \$1 million cap on the program — which her department has administered since 2008, when the tax credit limit was \$500. Applications for the credit must be made by Feb. 28, 2012.

Robertson said the amount of credit the legislators have allowed has been sufficient for the applications submitted in past years. If more people apply than the funds can handle, all applications will be accepted and the funds will be prorated.

Realtor and developer Alton C. Echols of Berryville said such barrier-free houses will be the wave of the future. He said Virginia is becoming interested in a program that has caught on in Canada, dubbed Aging at Home.

Here, it’s called “Aging in Place.”

A study by the Commonwealth Council on Aging recommended to Gov. Bob McDonnell and state legislators last week that Virginia promote accessible housing construction to help seniors stay at home, rather than moving into nursing homes.

It’s part of a four-part “Blueprint For Livable Communities” the council hopes the state will

support. Other goals are to promote transportation alternatives for seniors and organizations and agencies that assist them, like Area Agencies on Aging.

Katie Roeper, assistant commissioner with the Virginia Department of Aging, said the study spotlights the need to provide ways for people to remain in their communities as they grow older, and also the fact that older citizens still have much to give to their communities.

The age wave has challenges and opportunities, she said. “We have to leverage our greatest natural resource, the experience and intellectual capital of these individuals,” Roeper said.

Like Virginia as a whole, local jurisdictions will see increases in the numbers of older residents over the next 20 years.

The state council estimates that Virginians older than 60 will increase from 1.4 million, or 17.8 percent of the 2010 Census count of 8,001,024, to 2.3 million, or 23.9 percent of the projected 2030 population of 9,825,019.

Locally, Frederick County — with its population of 78,305 — showed 9,954 people over 65 in its 2010 Census count. That age group is estimated to increase to 19,277 in 2030.

Clarke has 2,387 seniors 65 and older in its population of 14,034 and expects that number to increase to 5,391 in 20 years.

In Winchester, the number of seniors is 3,676 in a population of 26,203, according to the 2010 Census. The number is projected to be 7,300 in 2030.

One spur to that growth might be the recent rating by the American Association of Retired Persons, according to Webber. The AARP rated Winchester a top retirement area.

Webber said builders and homeowners are becoming more interested in fitting their houses with amenities that will make living easier for older people.

“When we build our houses, we’re making them with wider doors and halls,” he said, along with bathrooms with special features, like showers that are wheelchair accessible.

And, while single-level homes are often touted to buyers as perfect for Aging in Place, Webber said people who have two-story homes are also making the investment in accessibility.

With a master bedroom on the first floor, Webber said houses with bedrooms upstairs are perfect for people who expect to have lots of family visiting.

Stuart Butler of Ashbrook Homes said even people who are “downsizing” still like a basement, for storage of the items that won’t fit in the main body of the house.

“We need to rethink buildings,” said Roeper, “so they will be accessible for everybody.”

For more information on the Livable Home Tax Credit, contact the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development at www.dhcd.virgiiia.gov/LHTC or call 804-371-7124.

— Contact Val Van Meter at vvanmeter@winchesterstar.com



GINGER PERRY/ The Winchester Star

Ashbrook Homes builder Stuart Butler stands in the master suite of a home at Westbury Commons that he built to accommodate the physical needs of older buyers.



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Stuart Butler, Ashbrook Homes builder, stands outside a Westbury Commons home. His homes include mountable curbing, minimal entrance steps and some wider doorways. The neighborhood is targeted to home buyers age 55 and older.



This Ashbrook Homes master bath shower has a built-in bench for sitting and a handheld shower head. It also has a bar, at right, to hold when getting in the shower.