

The Python Now Has Two Pigs
Boomers & Millennials

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The Baby Boom generation has long been known as the “Pig in the Python,” gradually moving through its demographic phases, and influencing nearly every aspect of life, with its outsized impact on neighborhoods and schools, then employment and now, retirement systems. The Boomers, born between 1945 and 1964 were influenced by dramatic changes in technology and social patterns, and exhibited tastes and values often quite different from their parents. The size of this group, and its relatively large spending power, intrigued marketers from the beginning, and the purchasing patterns of Boomers have been the subject of constant research.

As seen in Figure 1 (next page), the Baby Boom came to an end in the mid-1960s, and was followed by the “Birth Dearth” or the “Baby Bust,” often referred to as Generation X. The fall in birth rates has complex origins, but whatever the cause, the generation that was born between the mid-1960s and the early 1980s was much smaller. It got the attention of social scientists, but had less interest for marketers, simply because it was smaller.

Then, beginning in the late 1970s, those Baby Boomers really got busy having children of their own. And when they did, they produced the “Echo of the Baby Boom,” also known as Generation Y, or the Millennials (coming of age right around the turn of the century). This generation, covering people born from around 1980 to the mid-1990s (there is no exact definition as there is for the Boomer generation), is quite large. If the Boomers themselves reproduced at slightly more than two children per woman, the Millennials

would be a larger cohort, when accounting for immigration of Boomer-age parents.

The python now has a second pig working its way along, and as might be predicted, the generation that follows the Millennials—the children of Generation X—is again smaller.

As with their parents, the Millennials have caught the attention of the marketing world which is quite eager to figure out how to sell things to this huge cohort. Where the Boomers’ lives were shaped by ubiquity of television, automobiles and branded goods, the lives of Millennials are shaped by a wide range of computer-based technologies, most significantly mobile communications. This group has also been shaped by major world events, the attacks of 9/11, wars and the Great Recession, just as the Boomers’ lives were shaped by the Cold War, Vietnam and Watergate.

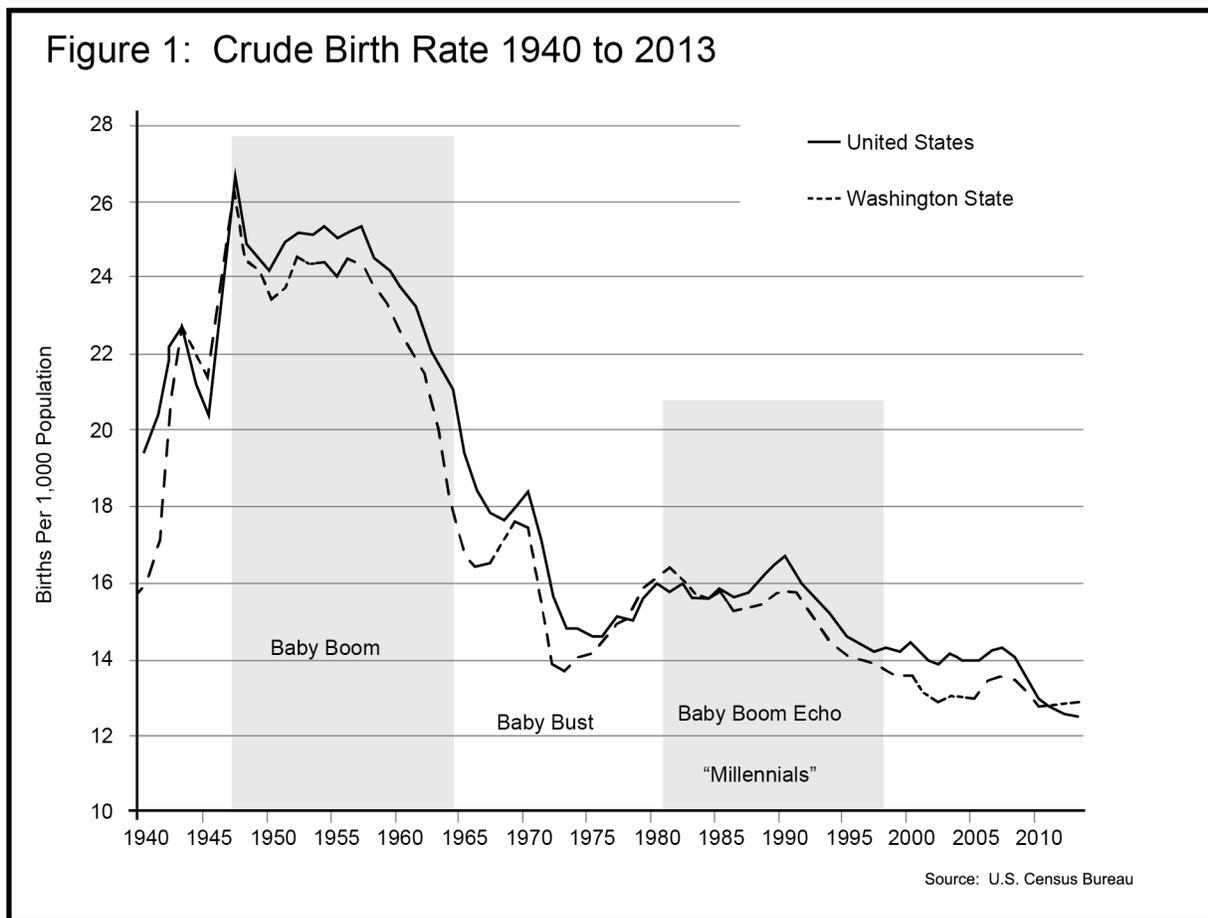
The habits and tastes of aging Boomers and

fresh-faced Millennials have generated an infinite supply of PowerPoint presentations on their proclivities, some of which stand up to scrutiny and some of which do not. The purpose of this paper is to shed some light on these two generations and their housing needs in particular, and to provide input to the next round of growth management planning. Both generations are in the process of defying longstanding expectations, so planners need to pay close attention to the real emerging behaviors of the Boomers and Millennials, and not to the myths that have been attached to them.

The enormous size of the Boomer generation ensured that it would get its way, and the size of the Millennial generation suggests it too will cast a long shadow over communities and the nation as a whole. These two generations will greatly influence the housing types, community services, amenities and overall quality of life sought in area the areas they live and work.

Who and How Many Are They?

The Baby Boom and Millennial generations are best seen as part of the overall demographic



profile of the United States. Figure 1 shows the crude birth rate (births per 1,000 population) from 1940 through 2013 for the country and for Washington State.

The first thing to notice is the extraordinarily high birth rate during the early and middle period of the Baby Boom. These people, born between 1946 and 1958 are now between 56 and 68 years old, and are retiring from the workforce in substantial numbers. They came into the workforce between 1964 and 1968 and benefited from the tail end of the great economic expansion that began to taper off in the early 1970s.

Many of the Boomers' parents moved into the first, inner ring suburbs of American cities, and the Boomers themselves moved into the next ring out, where houses began to get larger and more well-appointed than the small ranch houses of those early suburbs. Other Boomers were pioneers of urban resettlement that began in the 1970s.

By the early 1960s the birth rate had begun to drop dramatically, and by 1964 had fallen back to pre-war levels, signaling the end of the Baby Boom. The birth rate continued to drop in the late 1960s and into the mid-1970s, as the much smaller Depression-era cohort moved into their parenting years and the early Boomers delayed

their entry into parenthood. This was the era of the Baby Bust, also known as Generation X.

As the Figure 1 shows, the birth rate began to recover in the mid-1970s and reached a high point nationally in 1980 and in Washington in 1981. This is the somewhat arbitrary beginning of the Baby Boom Echo and the start of what we now call Generation Y or the Millennial generation. The birthrate peaked around 1990 and began a long taper that mirrors the taper of the mid-1960s. The smaller Generation X moved into parenthood in the new century, with a lower birthrate that really fell during the Great Recession, as the Millennials themselves began to delay parenthood.

In spite of these fluctuations, the population of the country has continued to grow steadily. A mitigating factor for the smaller birthrate has been a slowing death rate, which has fallen from about 18 deaths per 1,000 people in 1940 to about 7.5 deaths per 1,000 population today. Life expectancies are growing, and steady immigration of younger people keeps expanding the base of population on which the rate is calculated.

The other factor that leads to population growth in spite of falling birth rates is immigration. The Baby Boom coincided with the continuation of historically low rates of foreign immigration that began during the Great Depression. In 1946 the United States welcomed just over 100,000 new permanent residents from abroad, and this climbed to 300,000 by the end of the Boom in 1964. By 2006, while the birth rate was quite low, immigration was up to a recent high of 1.3 million new residents per year, dipping to just over 1 million by 2012.

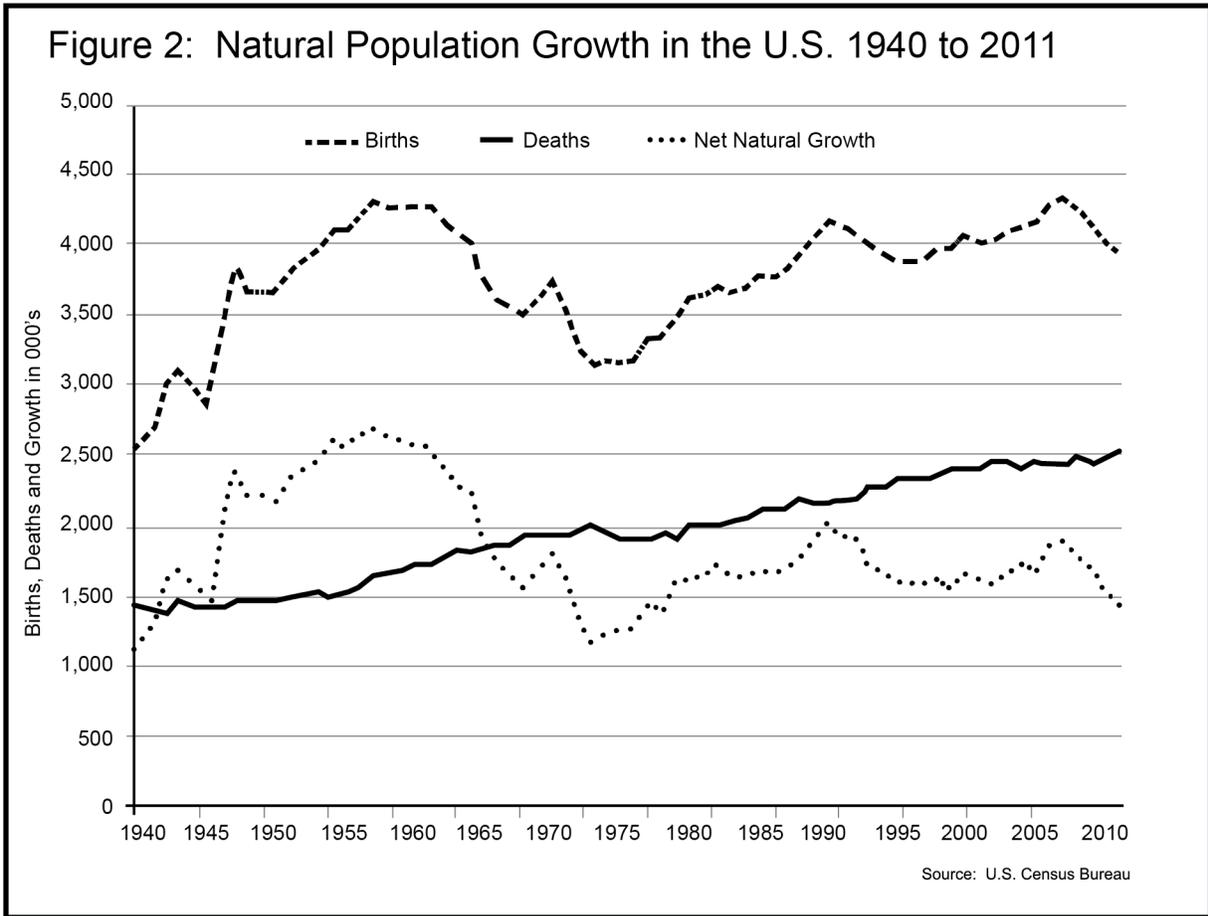


Figure 2 shows natural population growth (births minus deaths) in the U.S. since 1940, in numbers of people. The Millennials’ peak in 1990 and the brief resurgence of births in 2007 are both seen here. The pattern from the late 1970s has been for flat growth in numbers, and, therefore, shrinking growth as a share of total population (which includes net foreign immigration). Thus, most growth overall is happening because of generous immigration policies that bring people to the U.S. from around the world.

Figure 3 shows how “the pigs move through the Python.” The 15-year cohorts shown here do not correspond exactly to the generations being discussed, but use of consistent time periods allows comparisons. In 2000, the Boomers comprised all of the 35 to 49 group and over half of the 50 to 64 group. By 2013, the Boomers comprised all of the 50 to 64 group and some of the 65 to 79 group. The Millennials fit better, with nearly the entire cohort fitting into the 5 to 19 group in 2000 and the 20 to 34 group in 2013.

Figure 3 shows a few interesting things. First, by 2013 the Boomers have entered the 65 to 79 group, growing that age bracket. This causes the Millennials share of the population to drop by

2013. But by that year the Millennials are clearly the largest of the 15-year cohorts. Note also that the Millennials are a larger share of the population in Washington than in the country as a whole. This reflects the pattern of in-migration, which consists heavily of young adults. NOTE: Is there a way to distinguish the different age groups more so when black and white people can make distinction between the groups?

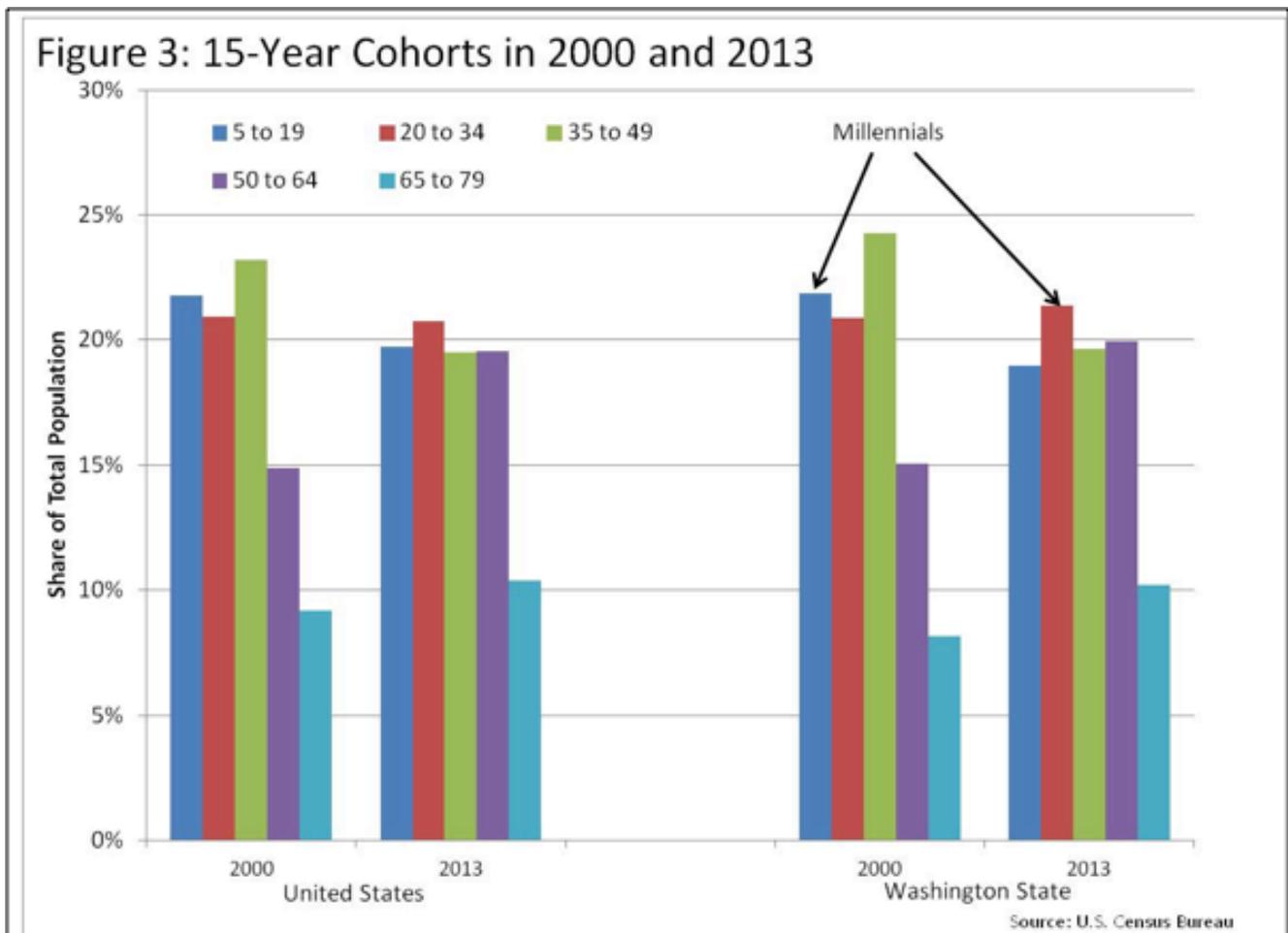
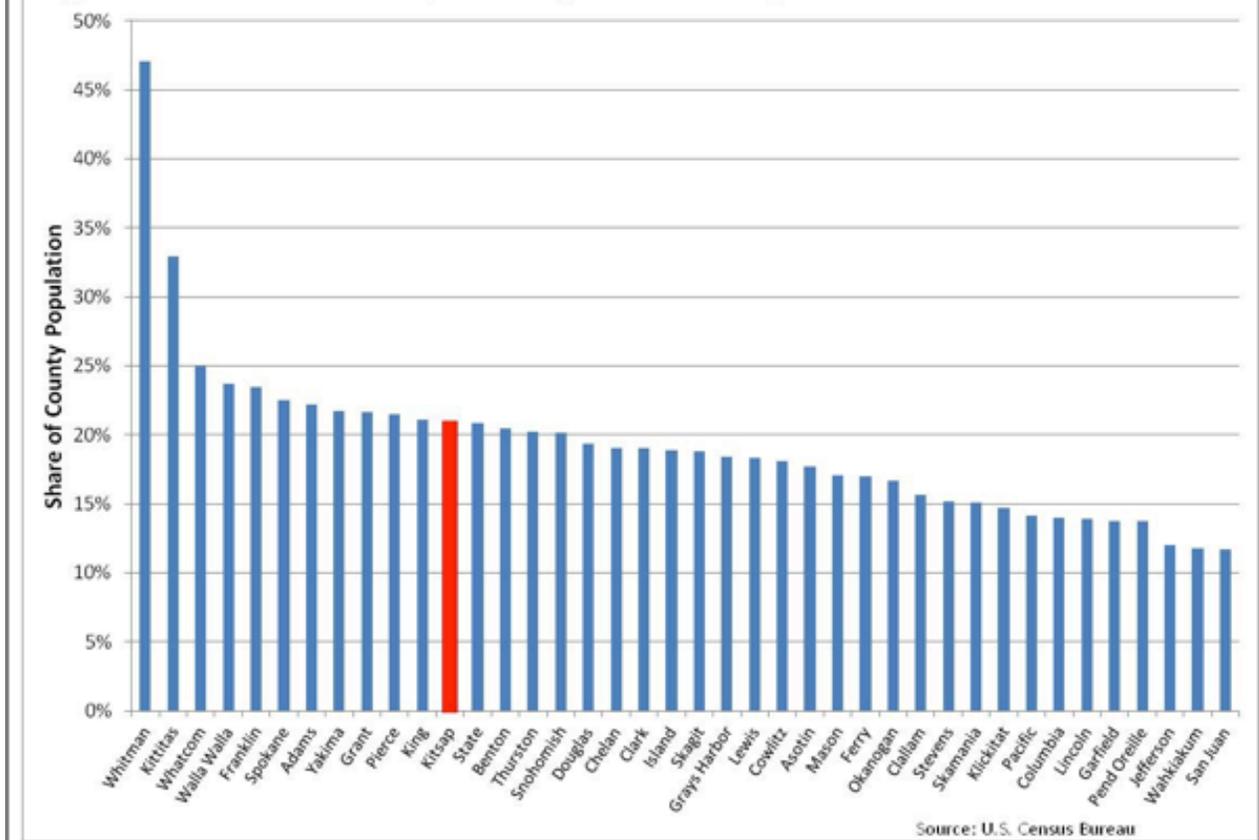


Figure 4 shows the distribution of the Millennial population around Washington, as of the 2010 Census. The largest shares are in the counties that have large universities, with Whitman County the standout. Also of note is the high ranking for the Central Washington counties of Franklin, Yakima, Adams and Grant. These counties have large Hispanic populations that tend to be much younger than the state as a whole. The counties with the smallest share tend to be in Eastern Washington as well as the Olympic Peninsula and Southwest Washington.

Figure 4: Millennials by County in Washington in 2010



Are Boomers and Millennials Blazing New Paths?

The media have been full of stories of the Boomers and the Millennials setting new trends in housing, especially with respect to dense, city living. If true, these trends would have profound implications for the nation’s housing markets, and some analyses claim that changes in housing preferences will lead to the abandonment of distant exurbs and their McMansions. Are these much-publicized trends really happening?

Downsizing Boomers?

A common assumption has been that as Baby Boomers become empty nesters and then retirees, they will give up their large suburban homes and move into more urban settings, favoring multi-family housing. After all, most Boomers settled into middle and outer ring suburbs with larger homes and greater distances from employment centers and the amenities of the urban core. Without children to place in the higher quality school districts and well-run sports programs of

the outer suburbs, the Boomers could avail themselves of the excitement that is coming back to central cities. And they may even get themselves a shorter commute for the remainder of their working lives.

Well, this downsizing trend has not exactly proven to be the case. The empty-nester part is happening: a June, 2014 study by FannieMae found that in 2012 only about 17 percent of Boomer households consisted of a married couple with children and among the older Boomers, born between 1946 and 1955, only about 3 percent consist of married couples with children. And yet, the study found that Boomers are not leaving their single family

homes at all. From 2006 to 2011, as the share of Boomer households with a married couple and children fell from 24 percent to 14 percent, the rate of single-family home occupancy remained unchanged. That rate dipped slightly in 2012, but not enough to detect a trend.

In Washington, among householders between 35 and 64, 81 percent live in either a single family house or a mobile home. This drops to just 79 percent among householders 65 and older.

Is this because Boomers have no choice? Probably not. A 2010 survey conducted for AARP found that:

Nearly three-quarters of respondents strongly agreed with the statement, “what I’d really like to do is stay in my current residence for as long as possible,” while slightly more than one-tenth said they somewhat agreed with the statement.

When asked to select the statement which most closely reflects their opinion, roughly two-thirds of respondents agreed that they want to stay in their home because “I like what my community has to offer me.” In contrast, roughly one-quarter agreed with the alternative statement that they want to stay in their place because “I cannot afford to move.”

These findings intensified somewhat with age. 81 percent of younger Boomers strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement about staying in their homes, while 88 percent of the oldest boomers did. Women indicated a notably stronger preference than men to stay in their homes (89 percent versus 81 percent).

It appears that the prospect of the lower maintenance costs and greater convenience of downsized living are not sufficiently attractive to lure many Boomers out of their homes. The AARP survey cites a predictable set of reasons that Boomers prefer to stay put, with proximity to family and friends being the most important factor. And the homes themselves appear not to present problems, with 81 percent of the AARP respondents saying they had a bedroom and full bath on the main level. As Boomers age in place we can anticipate the emergence of a robust industry of products and services designed to help them stay in their homes as they become less mobile.

So, if housing policies assume that a large inventory of detached homes will come on the market as Boomers become empty-nesters and retire, the result is likely to be a shortage of detached houses.

The Millennials: Urban Dwellers?

The notion of Millennials as hipster urban dwellers has become embedded in the popular consciousness. This is the generation raised on *Seinfeld*, *Friends* and other “urban comedies” that show a highly attractive city lifestyle. Perhaps more importantly, this is the first generation in decades to come of age in an era of relatively low urban crime: moving into the core of the city is not a risky proposition. The Millennials are portrayed as transit and bike riding commuters who, if they bother to get a driver’s license at all, use car sharing services instead of joining the time-honored rite of passage of getting their own wheels.

Because the Millennials are such a large cohort, and because they are presumed to be so different, the market research industry has had a field day dissecting them. A 2014 report by the Nielsen Company declared:

Millennials may be many things, but they may not be what you expect. Millennials are the social generation. They’re the founders of the social media movement—constantly connected to their social circles via online and mobile. They prefer to live in dense, diverse urban villages where social interaction is just outside their front doors. They value authenticity and creativity, and they buy local goods made by members of their communities. They care about their families, friends and philanthropic causes. But they’re also coming of age in the most dire economic climate since the Great Depression—making their families, communities and social networks even more valuable as they band together. [they are:]

- Diverse, expressive and optimistic
- Driving a social movement back to the cities
- Struggling, but they have an entrepreneurial spirit
- Deal shoppers and desire authenticity
- Connected and want the personal touch

A study by the Pew Research Center said:

Generations, like people, have personalities, and Millennials – the American teens and twenty-somethings who are making the passage into adulthood at the start of a new

millennium – have begun to forge theirs: confident, self-expressive, liberal, upbeat and open to change. They are more ethnically and racially diverse than older adults. They're less religious, less likely to have served in the military, and are on track to become the most educated generation in American history.

Their entry into careers and first jobs has been badly set back by the Great Recession, but they are more upbeat than their elders about their own economic futures as well as about the overall state of the nation.

They are history's first "always connected" generation. . .

There is some truth to these portrayals, but perhaps less than the myth-makers would have us believe. Most of these assertions are squishy enough that they cannot be tested in any meaningful way. But one measure is testable: the idea that Millennials strongly favor urban living.

The data does not, in fact, bear out the assertion that Millennials are crowding themselves into cities. Looking at King County, the 2010 census counted just shy of 300,000 people between 20 and 29 (i.e. born between 1980 and 1989), making up about 15 percent of the county's population. About 42 percent of these Millennials lived inside the Seattle city limits, which hold about 32 percent of the total county population, indicating that Millennials are, indeed, overrepresented in Seattle. But it also means that 58 percent of the Millennials in the county do live in the suburbs. In Pierce County, about 25 percent of Millennials live in Tacoma, which is slightly higher than the countywide share of 21 percent.

How about the neighborhoods most closely associated with hipster urban living? In 2010 the census tracts that cover Seattle's Belltown, South Lake Union and Capitol Hill areas held

about 16,000 people between 20 and 29 years old, or only about 5 percent of that age group in the county. So although Millennials are very well represented within these census tracts—comprising upwards of 40 percent of residents in many of them—they only hold a small fraction of the total cohort in the county. In fact, there were just about as many Millennials in Federal Way as in these central Seattle neighborhoods.

Researchers have begun to poke holes in the Millennials-in-the-city narrative at the national level. Jed Kolko, chief economist for Trulia writes that "millennial population growth in 2012-2013 in big, dense cities was outpaced by [its growth in] big-city suburbs and lower-density cities and even in lower-density suburbs and smaller cities." Demographer Wendell Cox observes that "Millennials, long said to hate suburbs, have embraced dispersion. [Between 2000 and 2010] the more recently built suburban areas saw their share of 20-29s rise from 20.6 percent to 24.4, an 18 percent gain. A smaller gain was registered in exurban areas, where the share of 20-29s rose from 13.2 percent to 14.3 percent; an 8 percent share gain."

The fact that so many Millennials live in suburbs, contrary to popular perceptions, has several plausible explanations. First is simply the matter of numbers. The Millennial generation is huge, and 22 percent of the population of the country is not going to fit into a handful of desirable urban neighborhoods. Even those cities seeing a genuine urban renaissance led by Millennials cannot absorb millions of new residents.

Then there are the economic explanations. To begin with, a record numbers of Millennials are living in their parents' suburban homes. And when they do leave, they will find that their meager pay cannot get them into those cool lofts and funky apartments in the city. This is a particular problem in Seattle, where Amazon and other high tech employers in the central city have caused apartment rents to get bid up to very high levels.

A more interesting explanation for the suburbanization of the Millennials is that the most logical place for them to look for vacant housing stock is in the older suburbs settled originally by their grandparents. The "Silent Generation" of post-war parents is now in its seventies, eighties and nineties, and their real estate is turning over. As noted below, Millennials will have just as high a preference for ownership as any other generation, and these neighborhoods offer the best prospects. As discussed above, the Boomers are not leaving their homes, and Millennials will have the best employment prospects in urban centers, so older suburbs would seem to be the best places for them to settle.

Another explanation is the diversity of the Millennial generation. "Hipster" is a pretty white idea, and a large share of the Millennial generation belongs to various ethnic groups that have gravitated to the suburbs or, as seen in Figure 4, live in agricultural areas like Central Washington. Gentrification hits these ethnic groups, which have historically lived in cities, the hardest. Gentrification of Seattle has caused the ethnic composition of South King County to shift significantly in recent decades. Hence the large Millennial population of Federal Way.

Millennials: A Generation of Renters?

A corollary to the idea of Millennials strongly favoring urban living is the assertion that they will have less interest in owning a home and would prefer to rent. This, after all, is a generation raised on both the flexibility that technology grants and the assumption of regular employment changes. It is also a generation that saw the crash of housing markets up close. The middle aged parents of the Millennials were particularly hard hit by the fall in housing values and the foreclosure crisis.

Again, though, this idea turns out not to be very valid. In a speech to a Zillow Housing Forum in July, 2014, Jason Furman, Chair of the President's Council of Economic Advisors, indicated that nearly all of the change in home ownership rates among Millennials can be explained by economic and demographic factors, as opposed to new preferences. About the possibility of a permanent shift toward renting he writes: "At this stage in the recovery, ascertaining whether

there is a permanent shift in preferences is difficult to know conclusively but several factors call this interpretation of the data into question.”

Trulia’s Jed Kolko has a similar view that demographic factors can explain shifts in home ownership:

Once we adjust for the huge demographic shifts among young adults - far fewer young adults are married or have kids than two or three decades ago - homeownership in 2013 was roughly at late-1990s levels. That means that the demographic shifts among young adults account for the entire decline in homeownership for 18-34 year-olds over the last twenty years. In other words, if the pre-bubble years of the late 1990s can be considered relatively normal, then today's lower homeownership rate for young adults might be the new normal, thanks to demographic changes. (HuffPost 8-8-14 Lost Generation)

Furman and Kolko, both highly regarded economists, agree that lower homeownership rates among Millennials occur not because these young adults do not want to own homes, but because they are simply not in the right position to do so. When they start to form families and become economically stable, they will own homes at the same rate as previous generations. Furthermore, the Millennial generation is made up of more ethnic minorities that have historically had lower rates of ownership.

Survey data support this view. A 2007 survey by the Robert Charles Lesser Company, a real estate advisory firm, found almost no difference in the desire for home ownership among Millennials and their Generation X counterparts. 84 percent of Generation X respondents and 81 percent of Millennial respondents indicated that homeownership was somewhat or very important. Only 7 percent of both groups said homeownership was somewhat or very unimportant. In a 2010 survey for the Urban Land Institute, two thirds of Millennials expected to be home owners within five years.

Myths and Realities

The prevailing notions of the housing preferences of Boomers (downsizing) and Millennials (renting in the heart of the city) are not supported by the data. This does not mean that there is no truth at all in them, but that planning for our communities cannot rely on these trends. Other preferences of both groups, as discussed below, do provide some guidance for local housing planning.

Meeting the Housing Needs of Boomers and Millennials

During the next round of planning under the Growth Management Act, cities and counties have an opportunity to adjust policies and plans to meet the housing needs of these two large cohorts of residents. The first step in developing those plans and policies is to acknowledge the realities of housing

preferences among these groups and to plan with those preferences in mind.

Previous rounds of planning were based on some wishful thinking. Plans assumed that a large and growing share of the region's households would shift into multifamily housing, thereby allowing preservation of more land on the periphery. That shift has not happened. The share of households around the state in single family housing has remained almost entirely unchanged since the GMA was put in place. Developments in urban centers reflect a shift in the multifamily market from suburban garden style units to urban stacked flats, but do not reflect a shift from single family to multifamily living. The data discussed above for both Boomers and Millennials suggest that

this pattern of preference will continue. The policy challenge, then, is to determine how to meet these demonstrable preferences and retain the spirit of growth management.

We will begin with an analysis of housing and lifestyle preferences that grow out of the discussion above and from reliable survey data.

Boomers: staying in place

Housing policies should acknowledge the tendency of Boomers to stay right where they are. While some will certainly downsize, most will stay in those large suburban homes until health factors require that they leave. A 2013 survey by the Urban Land Institute found that:

Boomers overwhelmingly consider homeownership a good investment (73%). The Boomers – most of whose children have left the nest – are not as anxious to move as the younger generations; indeed, they have less reason to move as four in five Boomers already own their homes (80%) and three-quarters (76%) live in single-family, unattached houses. Only about three in ten Boomers (31%) expect to change residences in the next five years. . . . Boomers might be willing to forego the large house, but that does not mean they are convinced of the advantages of compact, mixed-use developments.

Mobility and access to services will be the biggest challenge for the Boomers. The places with the highest concentration of Boomers are the most outlying parts of the urbanized areas. In King County the largest concentration of Boomers is on Vashon Island, followed by parts of the Snoqualmie Valley. In Pierce County the largest Boomer concentrations are found to the west of the Narrows, on Fox Island and the Key Peninsula and around Eatonville. Alternatives to driving will be important in these areas as will access to healthcare services.

Among Boomers who do plan to move to active adult or senior communities, suburban or rural areas are much more popular than urban ones. According to a 2012 survey by Pulte Homes, 24 percent of Boomers looking for a new community prefer an urban location, 48 percent prefer a suburban location and 28 percent prefer a rural, masterplanned community. In other words, most Boomers want to stay in the sorts of surroundings they are familiar with.

The ULI survey found that Boomers are somewhat more interested in owning a smaller home, but are not very interested in urban, mixed use areas. This suggests that small lot and cottage communities in established outlying areas may be the compromise that lures Boomers out of their big houses. As noted in the AARP survey, Boomers share a tendency of most older people to prefer to stay in familiar surroundings. Thus, a smaller home near the shopping areas, churches, parks and coffee shops they are accustomed to would present an attractive alternative to maintaining their original home. Such new, smaller homes can be built with principles of universal design that accommodate aging residents. This is easier than retrofitting 40 year-old homes that were designed for families.

Millennials: Having It Both Ways

If the tendency of Millennials to gravitate to cities is oversold, many of the other attributes identified in this generation do have validity. Moreover, conventional wisdom can ultimately transform itself into social norms. That is, if attributes are talked about enough, they become self-fulfilling. Planning for housing should consider:

Transportation alternatives. Millennials are, indeed, driving less than their predecessors. The Pew survey found that Millennials place higher importance on public transit than older groups and are more likely to use it.

Walkability. Millennials really like to walk. They walk more and place a higher level of importance on walkability than their older counterparts. The 2007 Robert Charles Lesser Co. survey found that 71 percent of Millennials say that walkability is an important or vital attribute of a community.

Quality and quantity. Millennials seem willing to trade off quantity for quality. This applies to interior space (smaller units with higher finishes) and exterior space (smaller lots closer to amenities).

Affordability. Much of the Millennial generation has entered the workforce during the worst economic conditions in generations, and do not have the financial capacity to afford high prices. While they may prefer swank in-city living, many cannot afford it.

Schools. When the Millennials send their children off to school, they will approach that process in the same way they approach everything else: expect choice and quality.

For that part of the Millennial generation that is actually living the dream—hip urban apartment, no car, bike to work, walk to everything else—the question remains, where will they go when they have families? Americans, especially in the West, have a strong bias against raising children in multi-family housing. And even if these city dwellers decided to buck this bias and raise their children in apartments or condominiums, they would have a difficult time finding

family-friendly units. Developers shy away from larger units with spaces designed for children and stick with the safe markets for singles and couples.

Thus, as the “echo” generation creates its own echo, they will need to decide where to live. They could tough it out in their existing apartment or condominium, or move to the nearest single family neighborhood. Data suggests that many Millennials are not too put off by existing suburbs, but the preferences described above would not fit well with newer, outlying suburbs.

This discussion seems to lead right back to a place mentioned above: inner ring suburbs. These areas, settled in the 1950s and 1960s, have smaller homes along established transit lines and are close to employment centers. They have the bones that can be retrofitted to a more urban, walkable atmosphere and are often more affordable than either the city or the newer, outer suburbs. Many of these inner ring suburbs are more diverse and reflect the demographic composition of the Millennial generation.

Housing Strategies

As local governments are updating the housing and land use elements of their comprehensive plans, they should consider the following strategies as ways to accommodate the housing needs of the very large Baby Boom and Millennial generations.

Allow duplexing of large homes. A large share of Boomers have made it clear that they want to stay in the large homes that they have paid for and that are in familiar surroundings. In the spirit of the new, “sharing” economy, they should be allowed to rent out or even sell a portion of that home. Current accessory dwelling unit ordinances are a start, but are often too restrictive. Turning a 3,000 square foot home into a condominium duplex, restricted to seniors, would provide much-needed new housing and enable aging Boomers to stay in their neighborhood.

Allow cottage cluster and other compact communities in outlying areas. The idea of cottage cluster housing began mostly as an infill strategy for relatively dense urban areas. But the market for these homes has proven to lean heavily toward older women—exactly the demographic inhabiting the outer suburbs and staying in their larger homes. Such cluster communities, built in the same general setting as existing large homes, would offer Boomers a smaller, lower maintenance alternative.

Invest in inner-ring suburbs. Older, inner-ring suburbs are a natural place for Millennials to gravitate. The original residents are now vacating the homes, and the home and neighborhood styles fit the expressed value of Millennials. But the tastes of Millennials are quite different from those of their grandparents, and these communities need a makeover. Most important, they need to be walkable and to have the destinations at the end of the walk—schools, shops, restaurants, parks—to be attractive to these picky consumers.

Invest in walkability. One of the most consistent findings of survey research among all groups, and especially Millennials, is the importance of walkability. This means different things to different people. For Boomers in outer suburbs it may mean access to safe sidewalks and trails with no expectation that there will be anything in particular to walk towards. For Millennials it will mean safe pedestrian access to schools, local services, parks and other amenities. In any case, housing strategies need to be accompanied by pedestrian strategies.

Encourage family-friendly multifamily housing. Family friendly multifamily housing is quite possible, and good examples can be found in many fine low income developments created by non-profits and housing authorities. Communities can take the lessons learned in these successful projects and work with developers to design higher density market rate housing that is appropriate for families with children. Such projects can combine the safety and quiet setting associated with single family neighborhoods with the convenience and low maintenance associated with multi-family housing. The Millennials are ready!

Conclusion

Meeting the needs of aging Boomers and emerging Millennials will test growth strategies that have been in place in Washington for two decades. These generations are large enough and influential enough to drive markets on their own and to resist any attempts to manipulate or shape their preferences. Planners have no choice but to face the reality of the trends that are emerging and that are outlined above.

Boomers will mostly stay in their outlying suburbs, but that will be fine since Millennials will have less interest in living in those areas. Outer suburbs can be retrofitted to meet the needs of aging populations and to get them ready for the inevitable turnover to the generation that will follow the Millennials. These areas have large homes, but unlike earlier suburbs, they have well planned public spaces that will age gracefully. The outer suburbs will not turn into unwanted ghettos, and now is the time to invest in their long term viability.

Millennials will struggle to afford homes of their own once they move beyond apartment living. This generation has shown a willingness toward flexibility and innovation, so planners can widen the scope of housing types that might appeal to them. Now is the time to reinvent housing and break from the binary pattern—low density single family and large, high density multifamily—that characterizes so many communities. Planners should be focusing on all the possibilities in between, knowing that the Millennial generation will be receptive to them.

This is an exciting time for innovation in housing and community planning. But that innovation must be grounded in the real preferences of these large generations and not in the myths that have grown up around them.