

KEEPING SENIOR CENTER COSTS DOWN: SOME IDEAS

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1. Different sites offer different opportunities and challenges. Choosing a site that doesn't have substantial ledge, wetlands, slopes or existing buildings will help reduce site development costs. Oddly shaped sites can complicate the layout of drives and parking. Having attractive site features is always nice but added cost should be thought about.
2. Senior centers, like most public buildings, need vehicular access. A front door facing the street, a back door facing parking, a side door providing access to the kitchen – these are usually required. Arranging the building and site so that there is sufficient room for driveways, drop-offs and parking without overwhelming the site with asphalt is beneficial. It makes more room for pedestrians and outdoor activities, for gardens and landscape, and for effective storm water management. And it can help keep the cost of sitework down.
3. Storm water management can be expensive. Understanding from the beginning what it will require to manage storm water given the topography and soil characteristic is important. Using bio-swales and rain gardens to allow water to seep back into the ground can be cost effective and send an important message about how we inhabit the earth.
4. Senior centers today provide a broad range of services and sponsor a broad range of activities. As do libraries, town halls, recreation centers and educational facilities. A new center design should be based on an understanding of what activities can be accommodated elsewhere and which ones are critical to the senior center to keep the size under control. Efficient use of public resources is appreciated.
5. Senior Centers can provide spaces that accommodate non senior center uses that can expand the financial resources that are available. This should also be taken into account in the planning process. As should sharing a site, parking, landscaping or other public amenities with another entity that can share some of the costs and benefits.

6. Plan for flexible use of spaces that can accommodate different programs at different times of the day or week. That way they are utilized much of the time and excess space is not designed and constructed. Sliding partitions can be used so that spaces can be divided up to accommodate different uses or are opened up for larger programs.
7. Locate storage where it is needed to meet anticipated requirements – for tables and chairs, art supplies, etc. This way storage areas are where they can be used efficiently, and larger storage areas for unknown uses are not constructed. But make sure the storage provided is sufficient to support functionality with some extra space for the future. Too little storage can be a problem too.
8. Having welcoming and comfortable social spaces is critically important for senior centers today as they become places where people congregate with their friends. The more they are distributed throughout the center the more effective they become. If laid out effectively they can eliminate the need for corridors which take up space while providing an unattractive environment. Using social spaces for both socializing and connecting different functions avoids social spaces that are isolated from the people who might use them or move past them.
9. It is nice to have program rooms that can accommodate large numbers of people, but if they are only going to be filled a few times a year it can be more cost effective to rent large spaces for special events and banquets. Sliding or lifting partitions can make a large room into a series of smaller ones, but it is easy to compromise the generous character of a grand space or the utility of smaller ones by pushing this idea too far. Really effective large scale moveable partitions are expensive.
10. A senior center that is just one square box can feel institutional but breaking it into lots of different pieces with wings sticking out can raise cost. Design strategies should be developed that provide nicely scaled building forms without getting overly complicated and driving up prices.
11. A small site may make a two-story senior center advantageous, but in general one story is more cost effective. Stairs and an elevator aren't needed nor is a second floor structure which is generally more expensive than a roof structure or slab-on-grade. Finding a site that can accommodate a one-story building is advantageous. And, in general, senior center directors, staff and users prefer one story buildings – they are more accessible, and it is easier to monitor activities.

12. Building structure is a significant part of the cost of a building. Wood may be cheaper than steel, shorter spans cheaper than long, slab-on-grade floors cheaper than a floor over a crawl space or basement. Alternatives should be considered from a cost perspective.
13. Generous windows and glazed walls add character and joy to senior centers, but their location should be carefully considered. It may be better to have fewer and larger glazed areas that make a big difference functionally and experientially than lots of smaller windows with limited utility – but that cost a lot of money.
14. Expensive exterior material are not usually necessary or can be used sparingly where they matter. For example, there are fiber cement products that are relatively inexpensive, can look really good and are long-lasting.
15. Same on the inside. A good assortment of colors carefully composed can add as much life and vitality as fancy details and materials for less money. Use elegant – and expensive – details and materials only where they matter. Plywood panels with a hardwood veneer can bring in the warmth of wood less expensively than fancy woodworking.
16. Trying to duplicate historic materials and details can cost a lot of money while looking phony. Good design – enough pushes and pulls on the building but not too many, windows and doors place strategically for functional and aesthetic reasons and cost-effective materials used in thoughtful and creative ways can give a community a building that people love without running up the bill. Good design can make the most out of any budget.
17. Grouping bathrooms and the kitchen together can help consolidate plumbing as can clustering them near mechanical rooms and janitor's closets – to minimize plumbing runs. And having them on the same side of the building as septic systems can also keep cost down. Each plumbing fixture has water supply lines, waste lines, and vents to up above so the piping cost can add up.
18. Public buildings require fresh air and exhaust air – generally through ducts. Organizing a building with this in mind and keeping at least some rooms and building wings sufficiently narrow to minimize duct runs can be helpful.
19. Energy Code requires a lot of insulation continuous around the entire building exterior envelope. Keeping details simple enough to keep costs down is advisable – which can be part of the architect's

responsibility. Windows need high performance values as well and meeting them in cost effective ways should again be part of the planning process.

20. Building code requirements for building systems that minimize energy use are quite high. There are a series of standards such as LEED, Passive House and NetZero that add additional requirements and may have significant long-term advantages but may add to the cost. It is reasonable for projects with limited budgets to start with code compliance as the standard to meet. Buildings can be set up for solar panels at very limited additional cost with panel installation to be part of a later project so that renewable energy can be implemented when funding becomes available.
21. Municipal senior centers are governed by public bid laws – Mass General Law Chapter 149 - in Massachusetts. Associated requirements increase costs over what the private sector might pay as they bring in builders. Chapter 149A brings in a Construction Manager early in the process to monitor costs and work with the architects and owners on approaches to design and construction. Although the CM gets paid for their work they can help reduce the risk of a project going out to bid and coming in over budget. Both Ch. 149 and Ch. 149A are worth considering.
22. Unanticipated issues can emerge during construction – asbestos pipe buried underground, soil contamination, high water tables, etc. Investigating possible conditions will not make them go away but finding them before construction starts tends to allow more cost-effective resolution.
23. High quality design with building forms and interior spaces that not only meet functional requirements but add social and experiential joy are beneficial to seniors – and everyone. Warm materials, connections to the sky and landscape, and a variety of spaces that people want to be in can do a lot to support aspirations. And in the planning stages, design documents like renderings and well done plans can help build support for construction. High quality design doesn't need to cost more, and to the extent that it makes efficient and effective use of resources it can help keep costs down.