

Orange County Register (May 2, 2014)

Laguna Woods isn't what you think: Younger, livelier, involved



Denny Welch, 71, scurries around Laguna Woods in the pink electric golf car she calls Bubbles. Welch inherited her home from her parents, Park and Betty Dowd, who moved there in 1979.



John and Terri Kelsall represent the active 55 to 64 age group that is the new face of Laguna Woods. They are often seen driving around in the Toyota Land Cruiser that belonged to their son Lt. Cmdr. Jonas Kelsall, a Navy SEAL who died in a helicopter crash in Afghanistan in 2011.



Dr. Tai Young Yoo and his wife, Ki Sook, enjoy one of Laguna Woods' golf courses. The couple began renting a home in the community eight years ago, after fellow Korean Americans recommended the spot as a good place to retire



John Kelsall works fulltime as the president and CEO of the Greater Lakewood Chamber of Commerce in Lakewood. Terri Kelsall runs Jonas Project from home. The nonprofit organization honors their son, Lt. Cmdr. Jonas Kelsall, a Navy SEAL who died in a helicopter crash in Afghanistan in 2011. The nonprofit helps veterans start up businesses with guidance from experienced mentors.

Laguna Woods since incorporation

Population

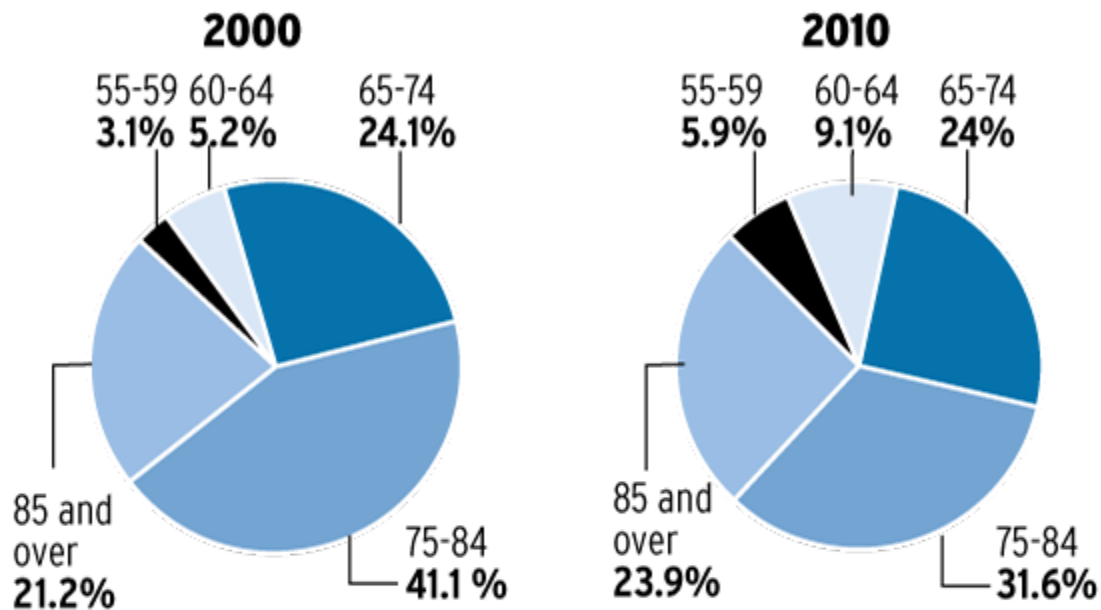
2000: 16,507
2010: 16,192

Median age

2000: 78
2010: 77

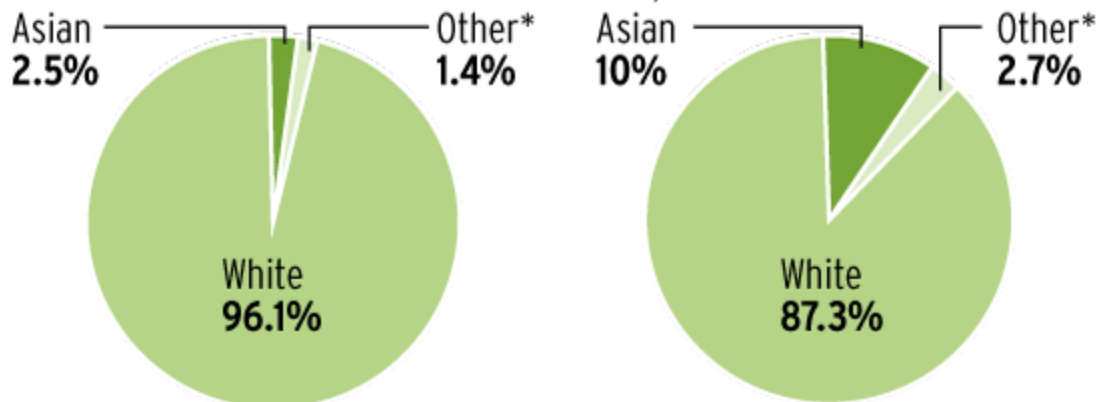
Population percentage by age

The population has gotten younger in the last decade, with nearly twice as many residents 55-64.



Race

The population also has gotten more racially diverse, with four times as many Asian residents.



*Other includes: Black, American Indian, Pacific Islander, two or more races

Source U.S. Census

STAFF GRAPHIC

**BY JENNIFER KARMARKAR and BROOKE EDWARDS
STAGGS / STAFF WRITERS**

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LAGUNA WOODS – John and Teri Kelsall were hitting their 60s, living in Los Angeles and working full time – he as chief executive officer for the Lakewood Chamber of Commerce, she as a vice president for Goodwill Southern California.

So when their friends heard they were packing up two years ago and moving to Laguna Woods – a retirement community turned city where the median age was 77 – they couldn't believe it.

“They said, ‘You're going to that old place?’” John recalled. “I said, ‘Hell, yeah!’”

Second-generation residents, the Kelsalls were drawn by the beauty and affordability of the community. Now, John, 64, and Teri, 61, say they wouldn't live anywhere else, squeezing club meetings, fitness classes and busy social lives into already-crammed schedules.

They're not alone. While age requirements remain 55 and older for the senior community – founded a half-century ago as Leisure World – the number of residents 55 to 64 years old has nearly doubled in the past decade, and the changes are dramatic.

Many of the baby boomers work, commute and find time to take advantage of the community's many amenities, and they support policies that are among the most progressive in the county.

New residents are nearly as likely to hail from Iran as Irvine, with affordability the biggest draw, said Gail Foor, a Realtor with Laguna Woods Properties. A two-bedroom co-op built in the mid-1960s can sell for as little as \$150,000.

And the Kelsalls represent only one aspect of the changing face of Laguna Woods. Since the millennium, the population has gone from 97 percent white to 87 percent. A growing Asian population accounts for most of the shift, in particular an influx of Korean Americans.

Older retirement communities across the nation are seeing similar shifts, scrambling to overhaul living spaces and amenities that weren't designed with today's active, diverse, tech-savvy seniors in mind.

The debate over how Laguna Woods should respond also is heating up, with an outcome that is expected to help shape the makeup and viability of the community for the next 50 years.

LEISURE WORLD TO LAGUNA WOODS

Leisure World was the brainchild of Ross Cortese. After his Rossmoor Corp. developed Lakewood Rancho Estates and Rossmoor, Cortese set his sights on building senior communities called Leisure World.

The first was in Seal Beach. Then came Leisure World Laguna Hills, a gated community Cortese built for seniors on more than 2,000 acres carved out of Moulton Ranch in the early 1960s.

From September 1964, when the first 10 families moved in, to 1967, the population climbed to more than 10,000. By 1972 it had reached 15,105, peaking at 21,140 in 1981 when the final 110 luxury homes were built on a hill overlooking El Toro Road. It stands at 16,493 today.

John Dudley, 95, recalls the area filled with orchards and teeming with wildlife when he and his wife, Leota, bought their home in "paradise" in 1975. Once, they had a mountain lion in their side yard.

Community planners considered the transportation needs of its populace. A tunnel under El Toro Road has served as a means to get golf carts and pedestrians to one of the community's golf courses. Golf carts have been allowed on designated city sidewalks since 2005, providing access to other parts of the community as well as to medical services and shopping centers.

As an unincorporated community, Leisure World derailed efforts in the 1980s to get annexed by Irvine and declined to join with Laguna Hills when that city incorporated.

Residents rallied in 1991 to fight a proposed international airport at the El Toro Marine Corps base, which led to several attempts at incorporation over a decade. On March 2, 1999, Laguna Woods became Orange County's 32nd city, prevailing by 342 votes of the 10,638 ballots cast. Its boundaries include all of the gated Laguna Woods Village, plus acreage that is home to three assisted living facilities, two 55-plus apartment complexes and several shopping centers.

"It's a great place to dream from and to come back to," said Denny Welch, 71, a second-generation Laguna Woods resident. "I've been overseas and I see all these great places. I come home and I still think it's the prettiest."

Among other distinctions, Laguna Woods became the first city in Orange County to allow medical marijuana dispensaries. It was the first to establish mandatory spay and neutering regulations for dogs and cats. And it was the first to prohibit smokers from lighting up on their home patios.

The city has leaned more to the left than the rest of the county during every presidential election this century. In 2000, 54 percent of Laguna Woods residents voted for Al Gore, compared with 40

percent of Orange County voters. In 2008, 51 percent helped elect Barack Obama, while 47 percent of voters countywide chose him.

Laguna Woods boasts the second-highest voter turnout rate in the county, with more than 78 percent of registered voters casting ballots during the 2012 presidential election.

“It seems like people have gotten younger since I moved here,” said Linda Wilson, 79, who came to Laguna Woods in 1998 following her retirement after 30 years as a nurse. “And conversely, the people that were my mentors are living fulfilling older lives.”

It’s now widely understood that staying physically active and socially connected are keys to aging well, said Dr. Laura Mosqueda, who focuses on geriatric care at UC Irvine School of Medicine. Laguna Woods stands out, Mosqueda said, for having so many options to help residents safely do both.

The community boasts two golf courses, an equestrian center, seven clubhouses and a couple dozen more facilities to keep seniors active. Services such as a subsidized taxi program, free notary services and a mini-branch library are tailored to seniors’ needs. There are also 228 clubs and counting, with the chance to learn synchronized swimming, talk politics or practice the ukulele.

Barbara Dauer, 68, said when she moved to the community in 2008, she couldn’t wait to be part of Laguna Woods Clown Alley, a club of about 50 seniors, some still working, who don costumes to entertain at schools, churches and assisted living centers.

At one clubhouse, residents choose from dozens of free and nominally priced classes, from woodshop to ceramics, through the Saddleback College Emeritus Institute.

“Most people say they have more friends and a broader social life than they ever had before,” said Pam Bromley, 64, president of the Baby Boomers Club.

The club’s 550 members suggest that “retirement community” has become a misnomer, with more seniors working later in life by choice or necessity.

It’s also getting tough to snag a tee time at one of the golf courses, according to Tai Young Yoo, 78, an avid golfer and president of the Korean American Club.

After delivering more than 10,000 babies as an obstetrician in Pennsylvania, Yoo retired to Florida with his wife. Then he got word about Laguna Woods from a Korean friend who touted its affordable housing, lush setting and nearby Asian markets.

Newer condos and single-family homes in Laguna Woods average under \$400,000, compared to the median home price in Orange County of \$653,850.

While prices remain affordable, maintaining the homes can stretch the pocketbook for those in the community on fixed incomes. Monthly base assessments run around \$600 for those in housing cooperatives and condos, and upwards of \$2,000 at The Towers, twin high-rises offering restaurant-style dining rooms, housekeeping and views of the surrounding hillsides.

“They are high,” boomer Teri Kelsall admits. “But I don’t think we could live anywhere else and get the amenities we have here.”

THE NEXT 50 YEARS

To stay competitive, Laguna Woods Village is eyeing an \$18 million overhaul to its recreation facilities. The plan includes

building a central gym, adding fitness trails and an outdoor amphitheater, upgrading existing clubhouses and adding several lounges.

The proposal has sparked debate. Some residents are concerned about getting to the new central gym, fear a resulting rise in assessments or simply don't want change.

"I think they're trying to gear this community more toward our age group," boomer Bromley said. "Whatever your political stance on the expansion, I think they're trying to attract (residents) and be competitive with the newer centers being built for 55-plus."

Councilman Bob Ring, 80, hopes the community will take a cue from its founders, who aimed to improve Laguna Woods for residents to come.

"The future is bright," Ring said, "as long as the community adapts to the amenities that future generations want."

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LAGUNA WOODS

1962: Ross Cortese buys 2,775 acres of Moulton Ranch to build Leisure World Laguna Hills; Golden Rain Foundation formed to manage assets and oversee community services.

1963: County approves Leisure World zoning; Rossmoor Corp. completes Clubhouse I; first gate opens to three blocks of paved streets.

1964: First Leisure World families move in; 530-unit co-op complex sells out in four hours; population reaches 1,730.

1969: First condos are built; population reaches 12,434.

1972: Single-family homes go on sale for \$56,000 to \$76,000.

1982: Leaders turn down Irvine proposal to bring Leisure World in city's sphere of influence; Rossmoor Corp. votes to liquidate; group of residents first file paperwork aimed at incorporation.

1989: Voters shoot down proposal to incorporate Leisure World along with Laguna Hills.

1999: Residents vote to incorporate as Laguna Woods.

2005: Leisure World changes its name to Laguna Woods Village.

2014: Laguna Woods marks 50th anniversary of Leisure World and 15th anniversary of incorporation.