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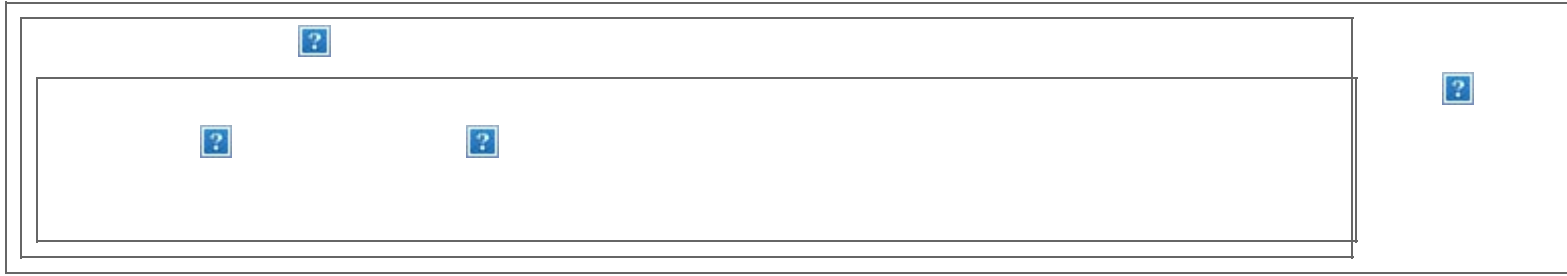
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The Age Wave Is Coming

Ken Dychtwald

On April 1, 1946, an earthquake occurred in the depths of the ocean surrounding the Aleutian Islands of Alaska. The quake's enormous shock wave immediately began traveling outward from the source. As it sped through the cold Pacific waters, many fishermen didn't even notice the foot or two of swell under their boats because it was traveling so deep within the ocean. But the wave was moving at jet speed, 550 miles per hour. In less than five hours, the wave struck the Hawaiian Islands thousands of miles away from the quake's epicenter.

For a few moments, the wave caused the Hawaiian coastal waters to rush out, leaving boats and fish stranded on the bare sand. Then the waters reformulated into a massive, towering tsunami that came crashing onto the islands' shores.

As it happened, on that occasion history dealt us two earth-shaking events at once. During that same year of 1946, a demographic quake began that would last nearly two decades. After dropping for centuries, from below 7.0 births per woman in the late 1700s to 2.1 in the 1930s, the birth rate rose to 3.8 in a postwar fertility boom that produced 76 million children—nearly one-third of the United States' population—between 1946 and 1964.

Ken Dychtwald will be a keynote speaker at ICMA's Annual Conference, Charlotte/Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, September 21–24, 2003.

The force of this demographic quake has been reverberating through society's institutions ever since. Although it began as a straightforward boom in births, it now is rising into an age wave, destined to crash upon society's shores, transforming most things in its path.

Boom Times

When the leading edge of the baby boom first arrived, America and its institutions

were totally unprepared. Waiting lists and long lines developed at hospitals across the country; facilities and staff were inadequate, and in some hospitals, hallways were used as labor rooms. Similarly, apartments and houses didn't have enough bedrooms for boomer kids; there was a shortage of baby food and diapers; and department stores couldn't keep enough toys in stock to meet the multiplying demand. When boomers took their first steps, the shoe, photo, and Band-Aid industries skyrocketed.

While many parents of boomers were raised in the crowded confines of urban apartments or rowhouses, they envisioned a different environment for their children. By the early 1950s, hundreds of thousands of new homes were built, in some cases resulting in the creation of whole new communities, such as Long Island's Levittown—America's first prefabricated suburb. Back yards and front lawns became as common to the American scene as tenements had been a generation earlier. Just like the hospitals a few years before, the public school system was totally unprepared for the boomers' arrival. There weren't enough school buildings, classrooms, playgrounds, or teachers.

Businesses once again pounced on the boomers' changing needs. In 1963, American adolescents accounted for an estimated \$22 billion in sales. They drank 55 percent of all soft drinks and consumed vast quantities of fast food, driving the proliferating franchise chains like McDonald's, Jack-in-the-Box, and Kentucky Fried Chicken through year after year of 20 percent annual growth. In 1968 alone, the under-25 crowd bought 53 percent of all movie tickets purchased and spent \$1.2 billion on records, accounting for 43 percent of total sales.

The Times, They Were A-Changing

The assumption that the boomers would migrate through life's stages in exactly the same way as the smaller and more traditional generations before them proved to be way off-base. More indulged as children, boomers also were more inclined to question the status quo and more willing to speak out and challenge authority than the members of any previous generation.

As part of their path toward fulfilling their parents' rising expectations, more boomers continued their education after high school than people in any previous generation. When they entered college, their demographic heft was, once again, an almost unmanageable strain on the institutions they were passing through. The number of college students tripled between 1965 and 1975. In fact, during the 1970s, 743 new colleges were opened to help absorb the glut of students.

By the 1980s and '90s, though, the "tune in, turn on, drop out" philosophies of many boomers' earlier years had nearly vanished. As is common for individuals in the third and fourth decades of their lives, the boomers had ratcheted up the economic ladder (albeit with some help from Visa, MasterCard, and American Express) and had begun to pursue increasingly materialistic goals.

When the first wave of boomers began buying cars of their own, the auto industry quickly shifted into high gear, producing new cars at twice the rate of growth of the U.S. population. Not surprisingly, the housing supply, like that of hospitals and schools before, also was overwhelmed by boomer demands. This was good news for homebuilders, as an unprecedented demand for a limited supply of homes raised the roof on housing prices.

As most boomers became parents, new crises arose. There weren't enough daycare

providers to meet the needs of this generation, and the onslaught of boomer parents—and especially working moms' demands for more flexible hours and benefits—took employers by surprise.

Like a Pig Moving Through a Python

The boomers have dominated American culture for five decades. Every time they've taken a step, the spotlight of the media has swiveled to illuminate them. The massive numbers of their generation have amplified and intensified the importance of whatever experiences they've had at each new moment in their lives. Just as surely as they had learned to use a baby bottle, they learned to read, play records, buy cars, vote, buy condos, and invest in the stock market. And these trends have been documented and reported religiously.

Yet the boomers' demographic weight has not always made things easier for them. While the group's large size consistently benefits others who sell them products and services, it often is a distinct disadvantage to individual boomers themselves. Their vast numbers have generated fierce competition for everything they've wanted throughout their lives: school space as children, team and club memberships as teenagers, college admissions at 18, and homes and good careers as young adults.

At every stage, they've had to fight their way through the demographic bottleneck that their own numbers have caused. They may have received more attention as a group than any other, but for individuals, the odds of receiving satisfying benefits have always been, and always will be, against them.

America Will Slowly Become a Gerontocracy

As boomers migrate into maturity, their vast influence over the economy, social policy, and culture in general will transform America into a gerontocracy. Throughout 99 percent of human history, the average life expectancy at birth was less than 18 years. During the past century, however, the average life expectancy has vaulted upwards, from 47 years in 1900 to 76 years today.

Currently, there are about 78 million Americans past the age of 50 (roughly the same figure as the total amount of total Americans alive one century ago).

By 2020, according to U.S. Census Bureau projections there will be more than 115 million U.S. adults over age 50—a staggering 50 percent increase from now.

And as the number of older adults is multiplying, the size of the youthful population is declining, with fertility rates in the United States, Europe, Japan, and other modernized nations dropping.

In the United States, the fertility rate is hovering around 2.1 births per woman, just on the edge of the minimum replacement level and down from 3.8 during the 1950s and early 1960s.

Concurrently with their growth in demographic power, older adults have substantially strengthened their political influence. Nearly 70 percent of Americans aged 65 and over voted in 1996, compared with only 33 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 24. And while the elderly have recently tended to divide their votes 60/40 between Democrats and Republicans, they quickly become a unified power bloc whenever their interests are challenged. In addition, they have the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), the country's largest and perhaps most

formidable special-interest group, to lobby for these interests.

Challenges and Opportunities Ahead

Whereas the 20th century belonged to the young, the 21st century will be ruled by the “new old.” Are we prepared?

Based on 30 years of personal study, experience, dialogue, and analysis, this author has come to believe that there are four key, aging-related crises toward which the boomers are currently heading—all of which are preventable, but only if we begin to take corrective action soon. These might be described as:

- Obsolete markers of aging.
- Titmouse’s revenge, or healthy aging?
- Financial wake-up call.
- Shangri-La, or “Gerassic” Park?

Challenge 1. Obsolete Markers of Aging

Aging boomers will not only live longer than previous cohorts but also grow old much later. When Otto von Bismarck picked 65 as the “marker of old age” in the 1880s in preparation for Germany’s first pension plan, the average life expectancy was only 45. On the day Social Security began in 1935, however, the average American could expect to live 63 years.

In 1997, President George H. W. Bush celebrated his 72nd birthday by parachuting from a plane to commemorate his last jump, made when he’d escaped from a crippled aircraft in World War II. U.S. Senator John Glenn, who in 1962 became the first American to orbit the earth, returned to space at 77 as a silver-haired payload specialist. At 85, Lena Horne remains talented and beautiful, and 72-year-old Sean Connery still is considered one of the world’s sexiest men.

The increasing longevity and youthfulness of today’s seniors, who are serving as new role models for a vital maturity, are causing a dramatic redefinition of what it means to be old. Today, Bush, Glenn, Horne, and Connery are just a few of the most prominent examples of an emerging wave of healthy, productive elders. “Old” simply isn’t what it used to be. However, the social-programs marker of old age, 65, and its accompanying entitlements remain attached to an anachronistic model of aging.

Caution. If life expectancy continues to climb, without occasional and proportionate adjustments in the age of eligibility for senior entitlements, all intergenerational financing programs, including Social Security and Medicare, could eventually collapse.

In addition to their desire to postpone old age, the boomers’ propensity for personal growth and new lifestyle challenges also will render obsolete the traditional “linear life” paradigm, in which people migrate in lockstep, first through education, then work, then leisure and retirement. In its place, a new “cyclic life” paradigm is emerging, whereby education, work, and leisure are interspersed repeatedly throughout the life span.

It will become normal for 50-year-olds to go back to school and for 70-year-olds to reinvent themselves through new careers. Phased retirements, part-time and flex-time work, and “reirements” will become common options for elder boomers who either need or want to continue working.

Possible Solutions

1. Unhinge old age from the anachronistic marker of 65, and index entitlements to rising longevity.
2. Encourage and empower people to retire when they are ready and when they can afford to, instead of holding everyone to uniform standards. Remove all economic disincentives for older adults who wish to keep working.
3. Smash the “silver ceiling” of age discrimination (and media-promoted negative stereotypes), making it easier for people to pursue meaningful employment and social engagement in maturity.
4. Replace the “linear life” paradigm with a new cyclic one that takes maturity into account as a time of new life-pursuits and interests and that supports such late blooming with the necessary educational and career-redirection services.

2. Tithonus’s Revenge, or Healthy Aging?

In an ancient Greek fable, Eos, the beautiful goddess of the dawn, falls in love with the warrior Tithonus. Distraught over his mortality, she goes to Zeus’s chamber and begs him to grant her lover immortality. “Are you certain that is what you want for him?” Zeus challenges. “Yes,” Eos responds. But as Eos leaves Zeus’s chamber, she realizes in shock that she forgot to ask that Tithonus also remain eternally young and healthy.

With each passing year, she looks on with horror as he grows older and sicker. His skin withers and becomes cancerous. His organs rot, and his brain grows feeble. Ultimately, the once-proud warrior is reduced to a collection of pained, foul, and broken bones but continues to live forever.

Tithonus’s story is a fitting allegory for what is occurring in our health care system today. While we have eliminated many of the childhood diseases that took so many of our ancestors’ lives, our medical system is woefully inept at preventing or treating the chronic health problems that arise in life’s later years. Age-related chronic conditions like Alzheimer’s, arthritis, osteoporosis, diabetes, prostate and breast cancer, and heart disease are reaching pandemic proportions.

The most troublesome challenges ahead, however, will largely be due to the rising incidence of these diseases among the oldest old, or those over 85. Although some of today’s 85+ population are fit and independent, 62.5 percent are disabled enough that they can no longer manage the basic activities of daily living without help.

There are four key, aging-related crises toward which the boomers are currently heading—all of which are preventable, but only if we begin to take corrective action soon.

Currently, 47 percent of people over age 85 suffer from some form of dementia, a condition that today afflicts 4 million Americans. In response, the average 21st-century American will actually spend more years caring for their parents than for their children. Already, on any given day, an estimated 22 million American households are involved in elder care, and within the next two decades the number is expected to double.

Unfortunately, we have neither directed sufficient scientific resources toward eradicating these serious health challenges, nor oriented or equipped our health care system to provide excellent geriatric care. Every medical school in the United Kingdom has a department of geriatrics. Half of the medical schools in Japan have geriatrics departments, but there are only three such departments in the entire United States.

In fact, 112 of America's 126 medical schools do not require even a single course in geriatrics, and fewer than 10 percent of medical students take an elective course in the subject.

Caution. Without a dramatic shift in scientific priorities and health care education toward the enablement of healthy aging, our society could be crushed by costly epidemics of chronic diseases.

Possible Solutions

1. Commit greater attention and resources to the scientific research required to delay or, if possible, eliminate some of the troublesome diseases of aging.
2. Establish standards of competency, and provide the academic training and continuing education necessary to ensure that health care professionals are capable of caring for the needs of the "new old."
3. Make disease prevention and self-care a national priority.
4. Expand and integrate disjointed government long-term care programs and services while encouraging the financing of long-term care through private insurance or employee benefits.

3. Financial Wake-Up Call

Approximately one-third of all boomers are currently earning large salaries, have invested wisely, and will benefit from their share of the more than \$10 trillion in inheritances their parents will leave behind. Another third will, in all likelihood, be forced to extend their work lives at least five years beyond current expectations before they might enjoy a satisfactory retirement. If they're fortunate enough to receive some inheritance, they might even live comfortably in maturity.

Yet a sizable segment of boomers—as many as one-third, and a group disproportionately female—have accumulated high levels of debt; have virtually no savings, no investments, and no pensions; and, in all likelihood, will receive no inheritance windfall. Today, these 25 million boomers have average household net assets of less than \$1,000.

Even though some boomers now are preparing for their financial security, unfortunately the majority are caught in a dangerous state of financial paralysis with no established pattern of planning, investing, or saving. From an average of 11.7 percent in the 1950s, the U.S. household savings rate dipped to approximately 10 percent in 1980, and had plummeted to less than 1 percent by the 2000.

Excluding pensions, the personal savings rate has inched back up to 1 to 2 percent—compared with 25 percent in South Korea, 12 to 15 percent in Japan, and 10 percent in Europe. At the same time, the vesting requirements of most pension plans are out of sync with boomers' frequent job changes, and pensions are becoming less certain as employers replace guaranteed benefits with do-your-own-thing, defined-contribution programs.

Caution. If those boomers who "live for today" don't hear the wake-up call and start saving for tomorrow, they will find themselves struggling with a poverty-stricken old age, inadvertently placing enormous burdens on the U.S. economy and on the children who will care for them.

Given how generally well educated and self-reliant they are, it is ironic that so many boomers are financially illiterate. And because so many purchases, especially those involving immediate gratification, have become easy or even unthinking, many

boomers are not balancing their current with their future needs. Unless changes are made soon, millions or conceivably tens of millions of people could eventually find themselves simultaneously old and broke.

Possible Solutions

1. Upgrade financial literacy and financial empowerment through a national awareness and education campaign for boomers while incorporating financial-planning curriculums into all levels of childhood and teen education.
2. Increase personal savings rates, possibly through mandated, tax-advantaged savings programs.
3. Make pensions more portable and flexible to match the boomers' mobile workstyles and discourage boomers from "leaking" their 401(k) savings.
4. Make "target" entitlements subject to affluence tests, to match the diverse needs of tomorrow's elders.

4. Shangri-La, or "Gerassic" Park?

Although medical science has focused on how to prolong life, political and community leaders have not yet devised a compelling vision for what tens of millions of long-lived men and women might do with those additional years. Currently, 40 million retirees spend an average of 43 hours a week watching television, and the elderly have the lowest volunteerism rate of all age groups, it is claimed by some studies.

Unfortunately, some maturity-oriented affinity and advocacy organizations seem to have become more concerned about what their constituencies might get from society than about what they might give. Unless we envision and mobilize for a new, productive role and useful purpose to life's later years, an "elder wasteland" could emerge in which, some maintain, more than 70 million retirees drift through their mature years surfing the Internet, wandering through malls, and playing tennis and golf while siphoning off a growing proportion of society's resources.

Caution. Without envisioning a new purpose for old age, we could be laying the foundations for a Gerassic Park, in which the young are pitted against the old.

In youth, many boomers were self-indulgent in their priorities. Then, in their late teens and 20s, many shared an idealistic commitment to bettering society. During the past several decades of career building and child rearing, though, for some baby boomers their early ideals have become submerged. In the decades ahead, the boomers will complete America's transformation into a gerontocracy as they take control of the nation's social and economic power.

If they can step outside a certain generational tendency toward self-centeredness and wield this power with wisdom and generational awareness, they could rise to their greatest height and make a remarkable success of our multiethnic, multiracial, and multigenerational melting pot. But if, like silver-haired velociraptors, they use their sizable presence and influence to dominate younger generations and gobble up half of the available resources, political "age wars" could erupt in which the young lash out in anger and frustration at the demands placed on their increasingly strained resources.

However, if this biggest generation can learn to exemplify a new kind of wise, mature leadership, then when the boomers' time on earth is over, perhaps they will be remembered not just as the largest generation in history but also as the finest.

The choice is ours.

Possible Solutions

1. Envision and realize a new purpose for elderhood that emphasizes the contributions of wisdom, generational consciousness, and mature leadership.
2. Prepare a young-and-old melting pot through the encouragement of a wide range of intergenerational programs and activities, including work teams and "tribunals."
3. Create and mobilize a powerful Elder Corps in which millions of older adults are recruited to share their values, knowledge, and skills with youth in need.

Ken Dychtwald, Ph.D., author and speaker, is also a consultant and a fellow of the World Economic Forum, San Francisco, California. He is the author of 10 books, including *Age Wave* and his latest, *Age Power: How the 21st Century Will Be Ruled by the New Old*. He can be reached at www.agewave.com or kdychtwald@agewave.com. This article is adapted from *Age Power: How the 21st Century will be Ruled by the New Old*, published by Tarcher/Putnam (September 2000).

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Ethics Inquiries

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The Corporate Invitation

Scenario: A company based outside the United States has invited the department director to serve on its advisory board. The company wants the advisory board to give it guidance on how to succeed in the local government market. As part of the compensation for her service, the department director would receive stock equity, which would have value only if the company were to go public.

The department head also participates in a public-interest group that routinely discusses companies and how well they are serving local governments. The county where she works has no dealings with this particular company. What are the ethical issues she should consider?

Response: As with any outside employment, the employee should be sure to check with her boss or governing body to ensure that acceptance of the offer would be appropriate. She will need to discuss whether or not there would be any conflict of interest with her official duties or with any county ethics laws or regulations. In addition, she should be careful to avoid any involvement with advertisements or other activities that might make it appear that she is endorsing the company.

Tenet 12 of the ICMA Code of Ethics reinforces the principles that are important in outside employment, investments, and other business activities that could lead to a conflict of interest: "Seek no favor; believe that personal aggrandizement or profit secured by confidential information or by misuse of public time is dishonest."

Will His Wife Sign the Councilmember's Petition?

Scenario: There is fierce competition for the city council in the upcoming election, with six of the seven seats open to candidates. One newly appointed councilmember approached the city manager to ask if the manager would be willing to sign his nomination petition. The manager explained that the ICMA Code of Ethics prohibited him from taking a position in the race, including signing a nomination petition. The councilmember accepted that explanation but went on with another request: Would the manager's wife sign his nomination petition?

The city manager told him that it would be inadvisable for the councilmember to ask his wife because that could give an appearance that the city manager favored one councilmember over another. Unfortunately, this response did not go over well with the councilmember. He was not impressed with the city manager's logic and seemed offended. What can the manager do to help the council understand the dilemma of getting his wife involved in the local election campaign?

Response: The city manager handled the request properly by explaining his obligations under the ICMA Code of Ethics and sharing his discomfort over the councilmember's request that the manager's wife sign his petition. At the same time, the prohibitions against political activity involving political candidates only apply to ICMA members. If the councilmember decides to approach the manager's wife directly, it will be up to her to decide whether or not to sign the nomination petition.

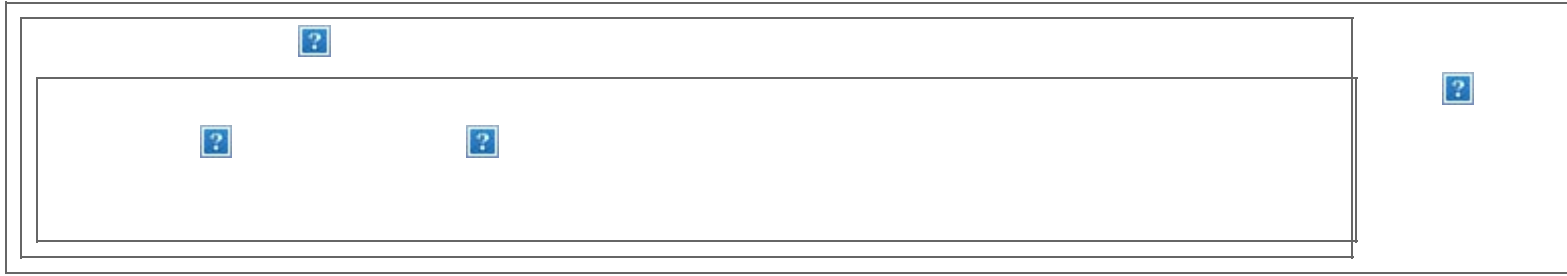
Often, the family of a local government manager is sympathetic to the pressures that go with public service and will stay out of controversial political activities, especially when a request involves the local council election. She may decide not to sign the petition, understanding that it could create problems for her husband.

With so many new elected officials coming onto the council, the city manager may want to take some time during the council's orientation to give them an overview of the ICMA Code of Ethics and of his professional responsibilities to it.

Ethics advice is a popular service provided to ICMA members. The inquiries and advice are reviewed by the Committee on Professional Conduct, the ethics committee of the ICMA Executive Board. Some of the inquiries are revised and published as a regular feature in PM, to give guidance to members in the big and little ethical decisions they make daily. If you have a question about your obligations under the ICMA Code of Ethics, call Elizabeth Kellar at 202/962-3611, e-mail, ekellar@icma.org or Martha Peregó at 202/962-3668, e-mail, mperego@icma.org.

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Profile

Following Her Father's Lead, She Oversees \$423 Million Budget and Staff of 2,600



Jan Christofferson is executive officer of [Placer County, California.](#)

Placer County, California, Executive Officer Jan Christofferson believes strongly that local government should be open and approachable. It shouldn't be a cold, distant bureaucracy that makes decisions far from the public view.

This belief has been the cornerstone of her approach during her 18 months as the county's top administrator. A 14-year Meadow Vista resident, Christofferson took

over the post in June 2001, when longtime CEO Don Lunsford retired.

Christofferson and her management team have spent much of their time dealing with hard-to-ignore issues: balancing budgets, planning for the new buildings the county will need as its population continues to grow, and carrying out policies put forth by the board of supervisors. At the same time, they're always looking for ways to make sure that county government is responsive to the public.

"The taxpayers should get excellent service, and county employees should never forget who pays for the services we deliver," Christofferson explained.

She oversees a county government with an annual budget of \$423 million and about 2,600 full-time employees. Her biggest challenges include keeping the county economically diverse and healthy, responding to changing demographic conditions, preserving open space, and helping to maintain the county's farm economy. "Hopefully, we will make substantial progress in replacing aging county facilities and also begin to acquire some key open-space properties under the Placer Legacy program," she said.

"Generally, I want to continue to build a team atmosphere where everyone's input is valued and considered. Ultimately, I expect the team approach to result in better organization and coordination within the county and better customer service."

Christofferson followed in the footsteps of her father, Bob Christofferson, who spent 40 years as city manager in San Dimas, Salinas, Covina, Fresno, and Redding, California. She started her career as an administrative intern for the city of Ventura. In 1979, Yuba County hired her to be an entry-level personnel analyst, a position that had previously been held by now-retired Roseville, California, City Manager Allen Johnson. At about the same time, Christofferson earned a master's degree in public administration from the University of Southern California.

She advanced through several positions in Yuba County, including senior personnel analyst, interim personnel director, and interim county administrator. In 1995, she took over as county administrative officer at a time when Yuba County was facing a huge budget crisis and massive layoffs.

Statewide, there are only a handful of women in top county administrative posts.

"Perhaps, some people treat me differently from a male county executive, but I don't think about it much, and I don't let it bother me," Christofferson said. "The gender issue is pretty much a nonissue for me, as I expect to constantly have to prove myself through my job performance." Her son, Christoffer Dunstan, is a 17-year-old senior at Colfax High School and active in the Thunderpaw Multimedia program. Daughter Marie Dunstan is a 14-year-old freshman at the high school.

Family interests include hiking, traveling, museums, reading, and movies. Christofferson and her kids have traveled to Europe twice as a family. "Two years ago, we went on our dream vacation—three weeks in Italy on a budget," she recalled. "Each of us took only one carry-on bag. We never had a rental car, just went everywhere by train and public transportation. Such freedom!"

Mike Fitch, Former Staff Writer, Auburn Journal, Auburn, California

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Second Annual Swimming Pool Issue

The December 2002 issue of PM Magazine featured an eight-page special section on swimming pools owned and operated by local governments. The December 2003 issue will feature this swimming pool section again. If you serve in a community that provides a public pool for its citizens that was not already featured in the magazine, and if the pool is distinctive in style, structure, operation, location, cost, or other management aspect, share it in PM.

Send a 250- to 500-word description telling why the pool is distinctive, to PM Editor, ICMA, 777 N. Capitol Street, N.E., Suite 500, Washington, D.C. 2002-4201; e-mail is preferred at bpayne@icma.org. Electronic photo files in high-resolution pdf format are welcome. The deadline for information is August 1, 2003.

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