

# Billings continues to grow older

By TOM HOWARD | OF THE GAZETTE STAFF

Family brought Kora Breikjern back to Billings after living in Glasgow for 60 years.

"I was born here, and came back here because I do have a brother who lives in the area," said Breikjern, who resides in the Mission Ridge retirement community.

Breikjern, 79, joins other Mission Ridge residents for her evening meal, but usually makes her own breakfast and lunch.

"The meals here are excellent, and the good thing about living here is the socialization," she said. "We have the freedom to go as we wish, and if we want to leave town, we don't have to worry about things like cutting the grass."

Her 10-year-old poodle, Cory, is part of a growing pet community at Mission Ridge. "We have about seven dogs and three or four cats here," she said.

Breikjern, a onetime school teacher who was widowed 19 years ago, said Glasgow has an excellent hospital and other services. But she came to Billings to be closer to family.

Breikjern doesn't necessarily consider herself a trendsetter.

But experts say Billings will be home to a lot more senior citizens like her in future decades as the baby boom generation reaches retirement age.

According to the 2000 census, Billings had 1,905 people over age 85 in 2000. That's a 68 percent increase from the 1,135 counted during the 1990 census. The over-85 age group still represents a relatively small portion of the Billings population, 2.12 percent. But it was the fastest-growing age group over the past 10 years.

The number of people aged 75 to 84 in Billings also expanded substantially, from 3,572 to 4,969, for a 39.1 percent increase. Statewide, the increase was 23.3 percent, from 34,937 to 43,093.

The growth in the number of elderly people helped push the median age in Billings from 33.6



**DID YOU KNOW?**  
Females outnumbered males in Montana in 2000, 50.18 percent to 49.82 percent. The opposite was true in Wyoming, where males outnumber females 50.3 percent to 49.7 percent.

Kora Breikjern and her poodle, Cory, live at Mission Ridge. According to the 2000 Census, Billings had 1,905 people over age 85 in 2000. That's a 68 percent increase from the 1,135 counted during the 1990 census.

LARRY MAYER/Associated Press

to 36.8.

Boomers, who comprise the 35-to-54 age group, represent 30 percent of the Billings population, 26,166.

Montana's elderly population is expected to comprise 25 percent of the state's population by 2025, according to the Department of Health and Human Services.

Mission Ridge and other senior-oriented ventures will likely be expanding for decades to come. Mission Ridge recently completed 20 assisted living apartments and has broken ground on a new wing that will provide an additional 37 senior apartments.

Mission Ridge is part of a

"continuing care" community that opened on Rimrock Road in 1998. The complex is part of a recent trend in retirement living that provides "one-stop shopping" for seniors looking for different levels of care.

Bonnie Roos, marketing director for Mission Ridge, said many out-of-town seniors like Breikjern move to Billings because of the availability of medical care and other services. But the most popular reason for moving to Billings is to be near family, she said.

Charlie Rehbein, bureau chief of the Aging Services Bureau in state Department of Health and Human Services, said the aging population pro-

vides challenges and opportunities for the private business and the public sector.

"We're asking how we're going to provide services and what will be needed over the next 20 to 30 or 40 years as the baby boom generation moves into retirement age," Rehbein said.

For example, recent studies show a growing need for respite care services, which provide relief for somebody who must provide round-the-clock care for a family member.

"The stress takes its toll on the caregiver. A lot of times you end up with two people in the nursing home," Rehbein said. He said the availability of in-

home nursing services could be the key to helping caregivers.

Billings and other population centers will provide an increasing number of services for seniors as the population ages, Rehbein said. Yellowstone County currently has 14 percent of the state's population of people 60 and older.

"But that also raises the question of what will happen in rural Montana, where you have fewer services and less economic activity to support seniors," Rehbein said.

"The question right now is that we're not sure how much the state and the federal government are going to be able to step in," Rehbein said.