



The Raja Plan for Senior Citizens

Executive Summary

Allegheny County's senior citizens are one of our most valuable assets. They offer a lifetime of experience that can benefit residents of all ages. Allegheny County's senior population will continue to grow in the coming years as baby boomers approach retirement age. Unfortunately, many seniors in Allegheny County are at risk. Many of our retired residents rely on fixed incomes that make any increase in property or other taxes difficult to financially manage. Others who do not own a car or can no longer drive face serious difficulties because our transit system inadequately serves their needs. Many residents now find it difficult to live their daily lives and no longer are free to move about the county. Additionally, more can be done by the county and communities to help ensure that seniors are able to stay in their homes and out of nursing homes.

As county executive, Raja will work to ensure that senior citizens in Allegheny County receive the support that they need. By working with partners in the public, private and nonprofit sectors a Raja administration will work to create programs that allow seniors to live an independent lifestyle for as long as possible. Raja will work to protect low-income seniors from property tax increases. He will also work to decrease the financial burden on seniors by working to lower taxes across the board. Raja will also work to improve the quality of life and care of senior citizens employed in Allegheny County. By working to improve transportation services, providing educational programs, improving community services, and improving health services offered to seniors; Raja will help make Allegheny County become "senior friendly."

The Raja Plan for Senior Citizens

According to the U.S. Census, there are currently approximately 205,059¹ residents in Allegheny County that are 65 years of age or older. On January 1st of this year the first baby boomers, those born from 1946 to 1964, officially became “senior citizens.” This number will only increase in Allegheny County over the coming years as baby boomers begin to turn 65. Raja believes that senior citizens are one of our county’s most valuable assets. They provide valuable knowledge and experience. Our senior population worked hard throughout their lives; raising families, creating businesses, and gaining valuable experience that people of all ages can benefit from. Our seniors deserve the best that we can give them during these years, but unfortunately this is not the case. Our seniors, many of whom rely on fixed incomes and can no longer operate motor vehicles face a multitude of challenges. The property tax burden often times makes it difficult for seniors to stay in their homes. Ongoing transportation cuts have made it more difficult for those seniors who don’t drive to live an independent life. It is obvious that more needs to be done to help our seniors live a comfortable and independent life here in Allegheny County.

As county executive, Raja will work hard to change the current environment and make it easier for senior citizens to live in Allegheny County. We must work together to create a tax code that does not force seniors from their homes, provides seniors a transportation system that allows mobility, and explores ways to improve the overall quality of life for seniors. Raja will work with elected officials, communities, our hospitals, insurance providers, the private sector, and most importantly our county’s senior citizens to accomplish these goals. Doing so will help make Allegheny County known as being “senior friendly.”

As county executive, Raja will work to improve the lives of senior citizens by focusing on these following three areas:

1. Affordable Taxes
2. Improved Quality of Life
3. Comfortable Living

1. Affordable Taxes

Seniors living on fixed incomes often times find it hard to pay their taxes, which can force them out of the homes they have lived in for years. This is an unfortunate reality for many senior citizens all across Allegheny County. The United States Census estimated that there were close to 66,000 seniors in Allegheny County that make less than \$30,000 a year.² Increasing property taxes creates a great burden on these seniors. With the costs of other necessities such as health care factored in, those still making over \$30,000 a year may also face difficulties in making ends meet. As county executive, Raja will work to lower the burden that taxes have on our seniors.

¹ *American FactFinder*. United States Census Bureau. Web. <<http://factfinder2.census.gov>>.

² *American FactFinder*

- Freeze Property Taxes for At Risk Seniors: Property tax increases unfairly place a burden on senior citizens. Many have lived in their homes for decades and do not want to leave. Additionally, as some neighborhoods become revitalized or begin to grow, property values increase and drive out longtime residents who can no longer pay their increased taxes. Raja proposes that we enact a property tax freeze for those senior citizens who are most at risk. A similar policy has been enacted in Philadelphia which allows seniors to opt into a program that freezes their tax payment. This proposal would complement other existing policies aimed at lessening the burden of taxes on Allegheny County's seniors. Married seniors that make less than \$31,500 a year and single or widowed seniors making less than \$23,500 a year would be eligible for participation in the program. See *Appendix 1* for the full eligibility requirements for the program. In 2010, Allegheny County collected roughly \$265 million in property taxes.³ Data from the United States Census indicates that of that \$265 million collected around 25%, or around \$66 million, is paid by senior citizens. Around half of those residents make under \$31,500 a year and would be eligible for the program.⁴ Seniors in Allegheny County would still be required to pay their property taxes, but would no longer have to fear being blindsided by unforeseen tax increases. The proposed property tax freeze will not affect Allegheny County's revenue until after properties are reassessed and this freeze will only impact additional revenues that would be received from low-income seniors.
- Property Tax Reform with Zero Windfall: Pennsylvania's assessment system is broken. The current system is fragmented with little uniformity across the state and there is currently no protection for homeowners, especially senior citizens on a fixed income, who often see devastating tax increases as a result of reassessment. As county executive, Raja would push for a moratorium to state property assessment until the current system's structural problems are addressed at the state level. Raja will go to Harrisburg to push for statewide reform to the system to create a fair and equitable assessment system statewide. He will push to ensure that there is a regular schedule of reassessment for all counties so that a base year cannot stay in place indefinitely. Raja also supports legislation that ensures that no municipality can receive a windfall from property taxes.
- Cut Taxes: Raja will work to find meaningful savings in Allegheny County's budget by bringing accountability, streamlining services and incorporating innovation that will in turn allow the county to lower costs and cut taxes. Lowering taxes not only improves the lives of our seniors, but for people of all ages in Allegheny County. As other costs continue to increase, lowering taxes will help ensure that senior citizens are secure in their finances.

³ 2010 County of Allegheny Pennsylvania: *Comprehensive Annual Financial Report*. Rep. Allegheny County, 31 Dec. 2010. Web. <<http://www.alleghenycounty.us/control/cfr2010.pdf>>.

⁴ *American FactFinder*

2. Improved Quality of Life

As part of Raja's goal of making Allegheny County "senior friendly", Raja believes that we must focus on issues that directly affect the quality of life for our region's senior citizens. To do this we must work to keep seniors engaged in their communities, ensure that they have access to affordable and reliable transportation, and have access to organizations that help provide services that allow them to continue to live independent and fulfilling lives. Additionally, Raja will work with government agencies as well as nonprofit organizations in order to ensure that our seniors are provided with the best medical care that can be provided.

- **Ensure that Seniors Have Access to Reliable Transit:** Many senior citizens do not own a car or are no longer able to drive. For those seniors, reliable transportation is a necessity. The Port Authority currently offers free bus passes to eligible seniors and the ACCESS van service. ACCESS vans are a door-to-door, shared ride transportation service for senior citizens. However, cuts in Port Authority routes have made it more difficult for seniors to get around Allegheny County. Additionally, the ACCESS service is often overcrowded and using it can become an "all-day" ordeal. As county executive, Raja will work to address the transportation issues facing seniors by working towards bringing back bus routes or opening up those routes currently not being serviced to outside competition. Additionally, Raja will investigate ways to make the ACCESS service more efficient by partnering with nonprofit service agencies that work with senior citizens.
- **Jobs for Senior Citizens:** Allegheny County's senior citizens offer a wealth of wisdom and experience that can be beneficial to local startups and nonprofit organizations. They can offer advice on strategy, accounting, marketing, legal and other important skills that many organizations need. Raja will work with these organizations to create a program that allows seniors to sign up with Allegheny County and they will in turn be deployed on the boards of startups and nonprofit organizations in the county. This program could also be part of the "Innovation Zone" and the funding for these seniors can be offset via the Marcellus Shale Revenues. These can be part-time jobs that will offer helpful supplemental income to many senior citizens.
- **Keep Our Seniors Involved:** As county executive, Raja will work with community groups, county parks, senior centers and other institutions across Allegheny County to develop voluntary programs that offer senior citizens the chance to be involved. These programs can take the form of volunteering or mentoring programs within the communities that they live. Raja will also work with Allegheny County Parks to develop programs that keep seniors active and outdoors, helping to promote health and well-being. By partnering with community nonprofits, we hope to offer such programs for free or at a very low cost.

- Education: Many seniors find it difficult to keep up with new technologies that have revolutionized the way that we communicate with each other. Raja will work with local nonprofit organizations and CCAC to develop technology training programs for seniors. Learning how to use computers and new communication tools such as Skype and Facebook will help Allegheny County seniors participate in daily life and keep in touch with friends and family that do not live locally.

3. Comfortable Living

Raja knows that above everything else, senior citizens want to be able to stay in their homes and communities. Often, medical concerns necessitate the move into a retirement home because no other alternative exists for families. As county executive, Raja will work to ensure that being able to stay at home is possible for our seniors by working with public, private and nonprofit organizations to provide needed care without the need to enter a nursing home.

- Support for At-Home Care: Raja will work with the Allegheny County Area Agency on Aging to further support the at-home nursing care that they provide. Raja will also explore the opportunities of working with nonprofit and medical organizations in Allegheny County to find medical volunteers to help supplement the services already provided by the county. Raja will work to help change the service model of these senior centers utilizing innovative ideas from local nonprofit organizations such as Mt. Lebanon Village. Mt. Lebanon Village is a membership based nonprofit organization that uses community volunteers of all ages that help to keep senior citizens active and independent. They provide services such as transportation and social activities that ultimately assist senior citizens in staying in their homes.⁵ What sets organizations such as Mt. Lebanon Village apart from traditional senior centers is that they are small and personal community organizations that offer an important intergenerational component that is missing in Senior Community Centers.
- Support County Senior Centers: Raja will work with senior community centers across Allegheny County to help them better support the needs of senior citizens. By working toward a more community-based model, senior centers can deliver services that provide senior's connections to the entire community and allow them to live an active lifestyle.
- Offer Less Critical Care at Kane Hospitals: Raja has stated that he would investigate options to increase the efficiency and quality of care at the Kane Hospitals. The Kane Hospitals provide a very important service to the citizens of Allegheny County. While

⁵ "About Us - Mt. Lebanon Village." *About Us*. Mt. Lebanon Village. Web. 12 Oct. 2011. <<http://mtlebanonvillage.org/index.php?page=about-us>>.

investigating the possibilities, Raja will work to ensure that any structural changes that are made include the addition of lesser types of medical services by the Kane Hospitals.

Appendix 1

Property Tax Freeze Program Requirements:

Age Requirement:

- Your or your spouse is 65 years or older OR

- You are a widow/widower 50 years old or older AND your spouse was at least 65 years old at the time of his or her death.

Income Requirement:

- You are single/widowed and your 2009 income was less than \$23,500 OR
- You are married and your 2009 combined income was less than \$31,500.

Residence Requirement:

- You must own and occupy the property as your primary residence AND
- Your Real Estate Tax bill for that property will be increasing.