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Boomers told to step aside

LAURA BERMAN

The generation with "baby" in its nickname isn't aging gracefully.

Once, boomers were the nation's delight, prized for youth, rock 'n' roll and omnivorous habits of consumption. In sheer bigness, we couldn't be bested. Trailing alphabetical generations — X and Y — arrived with smaller numbers and weaker cultural influence.

But now, the boomers — who just a few months ago seemed amusingly eccentric as 60-year-olds in blue jeans — are shedding their cultural appeal faster than they're losing their hair.

Once-vaunted attributes — education, sense of irony and habits of entitlement — no longer loom as qualities to be emulated. Young tech-savvy adults count baby boomer deaths online, with a site that includes numbers for "boomers not yet dead."

Celebrated generation

This post-World War II population bulge, 1946 to 1964, was long celebrated, indulged and marketed to by Hollywood and Madison Avenue. Without us, there'd be no '60s nostalgia, no Apple or Microsoft, no Bill or Hillary Clinton, George W. Bush or Barack Obama and not nearly as much talk about social justice.

But tell that to a young college graduate trying to scratch out room on a salary perch. As a 27-year-old colleague explained to me the other day, without apology: "I see the baby boomers as an impediment, a block in the road. This is supposed to be my time, so why don't you leave?"

Here, then, are the stirrings of intergenerational warfare, as millennials try to make their way in an age of scarcity, while their elders claim jobs and resources.

In Michigan, the nation's leader in 21st-century budget-cutting, political wiseguys are already using demographics to apply pressure. "Don't pass the buck," children plead to their elders in a pro-Rick-Snyder budget video released this week. "Don't leave it all on us."

"Yeah, Mom," you can hear the kids saying. "Cough up the pension, chow down on Special K for dinner, and — hey — please pay my car insurance, too."

Legacy of greed

The baby boomers are in the bull's-eye, hobbled by sheer demographic mass and the specter of generational failure. The liberal politics of the 1960s, when the first wave came of age, are out of fashion. Later greediness — the dot-com and Wall Street excesses — have enriched some but broken more.

In Michigan, a state where 40 percent of homeowners have negative equity in their homes, 18- to 34-year-olds are especially likely to battle the bulge.

The first wave of Michigan's boomers is turning 65.

"It's a gap that will likely keep growing," says Kurt Metzger, a Detroit demographer, noting that Michigan has

more baby boomers (26 percent) and fewer 18- to 34-year-olds (22 percent) than the national average.

Animosity is built into those numbers. Expect to see more politics trying to pit the impatient young against a "selfish" older generation that's squandered a lifetime of opportunities to get rich or move to the Carolinas.

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