

Effort here seeks to provide facts for decision making

Guest Commentary

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Would better access to data help inform regional policy makers as they face decisions? Would an online database that aggregates information in one place assist anyone who's developing funding proposals to help the community? Would a set of indicators, measured over time, give all citizens here a better sense of where we've been than anecdotal comment?

A group known as the Community Indicator Initiative (CII) has given an enthusiastic yes to all of the above.

Inspired by the example of how needed data has been made available in dozens of cities across North America, several organizations here have come together thanks to this initiative. They include those that have traditionally provided or kept socioeconomic data, such as the Spokane Regional Health District, United Way, the Spokane Area Economic Development Council, the Health Improvement Partnership, the city of Spokane, and Eastern Washington University. The Journal of Business, a major data provider via its Market Fact Book, also has participated in our planning. The Lands Council and New Priorities Foundation have brought a sustainability perspective to the effort.

Many other communities are now engaged in providing easily accessible data to their residents. In some cases, such as in Jacksonville, Fla., quality-of-life measurement enjoys a 20-year history. Organizers of the database there now hold regular conferences, publish books, and communicate with one another over the Internet. One of the early tasks of Spokane's CII was to pinpoint best-practice communities. Some that we have singled out are Baltimore, Boston, Los Angeles (via UCLA), and New Orleans.

After months of meeting over models, purpose, and common indicators, the CII planning team launched a set of focus groups in mid-September around seven topics. The goal: to get a read from local experts and potential users on the indicators we have gathered from these best-practice sites.

In weekly sessions, the topic areas of economic vitality; the environment and natural resources; health; public safety; housing and transportation; arts, leisure, and recreation; and education have been addressed. We intend to end our fact finding by meeting with a key user group—our locally elected officials.

We have learned much from these 90-minute sessions. After discussion, the list of indicators has usually grown by nearly a third in each session. We also have learned about participants' preferences in the design and usability of a database Web site.

It's too early to predict how large a swath of data the community indicators project will gather at first. Typically, 50 to 75 indicators have emerged for each category. It's unlikely that all of these will find their way into the project initially. Some variables are inherently difficult to measure. Some may not have benchmarks in other communities. Some, such as attitudes and perceptions, or the number of employed people who don't have health insurance, are measurable only by conducting a survey.

The financial resources we have available for the project also will shape the look of the database. Without further funding, our first filter for inclusion into the database will be whether the data already exist. A second might be the strength of community preference for an indicator. Should a few indicators emerge that the focus groups view as essential, but that aren't currently tracked, our motivation to find funding for a survey mechanism will be high. The availability of benchmarks will undoubtedly be another key filter, since one of the goals is to compare our community with others.

Currently, we expect the first iteration of the CII Website to be up by mid-2005. We will do our best to incorporate all we have gleaned from the community workshops into an attractive, usable site. In our first version of that, we would like to present the data with enough history that trends can be tracked.

Locating, assembling, and formatting some of these series will take time. In future versions, many hope that the data will be displayed in a geographical information systems format. Spokane city and county currently are providing some data in that form. Those links will be an integral part of the CII site.

Different members of the CII planning group may well use the data in different ways. Some might want to form a sustainability index. Some might want to present the data through the viewpoint of public health. Others will want to carve out data vital to business attraction and retention. Uses could evolve beyond those imagined.

As several participants in the focus group have commented, this is an ambitious undertaking. Can we do it?

Much of the work is being done already. The CII planning group is simply bringing together those resources under one roof, or Web address. We think that others—data users and producers—will join over time. The goal of making the community healthier through improved access to data is shared by many.

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