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All indicators say we can learn from problems in Boston

Experts see slower growth in 2007

By Bert Caldwell
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Everybody knows that Boston, with its many universities and high-tech companies, is a magnet for young professionals starting careers in biotechnology, for example, or software development.

Everybody knows, and everybody's wrong, including Boston's leaders.

They know better now thanks to community indicators which have replaced common knowledge and anecdote with real information. Boston is among the largest cities using indicators to measure community health, based on assessments of education, public health, transportation and seven other economic and cultural fundamentals.

Spokane has embraced the concept, doubly.

Eastern Washington University's Institute for Public Policy & Economic Analysis in October launched the Community Indicators for Spokane. Greater Spokane Incorporated announced a separate set of benchmarks, Spokane Vitals, when its formation was announced in January.

"It's about what we can do to improve our community," says Institute Director Patrick Jones.

The Boston project's co-founder and director, Charlotte Kahn, will be in Spokane Wednesday to keynote a regional conference on community indicators.

Boston started in 1996, when officials asked The Boston Foundation to identify the kinds of information that would provide community leaders a comprehensive, fact-based portrait of the city.

Kahn says the effort started with just a dozen people, but involved 300 within two years. At one point, the group's list of desirable indicators grew to 1,500. That list was pared to the accurately measurable factors that created a qualitative rather than just a quantitative picture of the city.

"It's a both-ends kind of process," she says. "What do people want, and what can we actually get."

Quite a lot, it turns out. The project's first report, released in early 2001, was 300 pages long. The most recent version, completed in March 2005, comprises 48 pages, but a Web

site, www.tbf.org/IndicatorsProject includes much more information. Click through an introduction to each of the 10 topics to a summary of context, findings, accomplishments, challenges, and the competition. With links, the detail is extraordinary.

There seems to be more to Boston than the Red Sox, although the Indicators mention — prominently — their 2004 World Series victory.

Kahn says the Indicators revealed the talent outflow, and attributed the trend to the economic slowdown early in the decade and Boston's high housing costs. When the economic bubble inflated by Internet startups burst, she says, Boston was disproportionately affected.

But the Indicators also showed officials that Boston and California's Silicon Valley were losing their grip on the high-tech industry to new centers in North Carolina and Texas, and with it the city's attractiveness to young professionals.

"That trend has deepened," Kahn says, as high costs and high-speed communications have allowed the outsourcing of technical jobs to India and China.

To address the housing issue, Boston has adopted new zoning that permits greater density near core areas and around transit hubs. Subsidies help reduce the impact on schools serving those areas.

"It really is making a difference," Kahn says.

She says the reports have become a sort of civic common ground, open to all, that not only keeps the community up on itself, but the national and international environment in which it must compete. Leaders have come to anticipate each biennial update, with the latest due out shortly.

"Having the Indicator Project really changed the quality of community dialog," Kahn says.

The regional conference begins with registration at 8 a.m. at the Spokane Convention Center and concludes with an evening reception. A few seats remain. Those interested may call Project Coordinator Lisa Capoccia at (509) 358-2221, or e-mail lcapoccia@mail.ewu.edu.

The event will give Spokane a deeper understanding of indicators, and how they can raise the bar for successful communities. If a city like Boston can learn from the experience, we surely can.

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