

## *The Spokesman-Review*

Community profile

### **Spokane by the numbers**

#### **New EWU Web site paints statistical picture of county**

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You've heard the slogan, "Spokane: Near nature. Near perfect." But how does our mid-size metro really measure up?

That's the question an Eastern Washington University numbers-cruncher will begin to answer today, when a comprehensive Web site of 150 Spokane County "community indicators" will be unveiled.

"There are a lot of surprises," said EWU's Patrick Jones, who for more than two years has spearheaded the massive data collection and analysis project. An economist, he heads the university's Institute for Public Policy and Economic Analysis. Spokane-based Foundation Northwest provided a \$108,000 grant to help bring the project to fruition.

Scores of Spokane-area experts suggested the criteria, which they believe best show how the region stacks up in eight vital areas: People, arts and leisure, civic engagement, economic vitality, education, environment, health, housing and transportation, and public safety.

Jones said policy makers, grant writers, news media, trend-watchers and the general public will be among those expected to tap the information for all sorts of reasons.

"It's going to be very helpful to people who care, talk and write about these phenomena to be able to actually see the numbers in some sort of context," he said. Where possible, the Web site also shows historical information and compares Spokane County's performance with state and national trends.

Among the findings:

- The number of Spokane County businesses has grown 18 percent during the last decade, totaling 14,233 this year, compared with 11,864 in 1996. Of these, 61 percent employ four or fewer workers and 16 percent have between five and nine people on their payrolls.

- The number of poor children in Spokane County public schools has risen. In 2004, nearly half of all county K-12 pupils qualified for the free or reduced-price lunch program, up from nearly 44 percent six years earlier. The county's total number of such children is consistently about 10 percent higher than the rest of Washington.

- The number of teen pregnancies is declining. For every 1,000 Spokane County teens between the ages of 15 and 17, 27 said they were pregnant in 2004, down from 33 in 1998; among 18- to 19-year-olds, 75 per 1,000 were expecting, compared with 95 in 1998.

- County road spending has more than doubled since 1999, totaling about \$189 per person in 2004, up from about \$82 seven years ago. Meanwhile, the state doled out almost \$130 per person in 2004, an increase of 11 percent over its 1999 total of \$117.

There are a lot of additional data; viewers can see how many people are registered to vote, for example, or how many businesses are related to the arts.

Tracking such trends is catching on in other U.S. cities, most of which are much larger than Spokane, Jones said.

The EWU Web site will remain a relevant resource, he added, because it will be revised as new figures become available. All source material comes from agencies and groups known for producing accurate information that is frequently updated.

The "Benchmarking Spokane" project "democratizes data," Jones said, which enables informed decision-making – relying on figures and facts instead of anecdotes.

Mark Hurtubise, president and chief executive officer of Foundation Northwest, said he expects the Web site will become a report card that points to measurable successes and community needs.

He said he is proud the foundation's grant could help the Web site go live. "It'll help us determine if we're actually moving the meter in the grand scheme of things. And it fits so well with our strategic plan to foster vibrant and sustainable communities."

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