

The Spokesman-Review

Wealth of data about our community is at our fingertips

Cheryl-Anne Millsap
Staff writer
April 23, 2007

Fast fact

For more information about the Community Indicators Initiative of Spokane County go to communityindicators.ewu.edu.

In January of 1999 I started looking into Spokane.

Not just at the material included in the relocation packet that arrived in the mail. Not just into the stories I found in the newspaper or on the television.

I went deeper.

While we considered moving our family into a place that was in some ways as distant and foreign to us as the moon, I sat down in front of my computer and went to work.

The amount of information you could access online eight years ago was very small compared to the amount of online content available today. And what I wanted then was information buried below the superficial.

What I wanted was to find the pulse of the place I would be calling home. I wanted clues to the personality and livability of the area.

So, while the older children were in school and the baby napped, I dug into information about the school districts. About the economy. About real estate and employment. I looked for crime statistics and for the minutiae that would bring the region into clearer focus.

It took hours and hours of my time and the process was clunky and unorganized. But I gradually put together a notebook of pages printed off the Internet.

I built a book about Spokane.

Now, just a few years later, the kind of information I looked for so diligently – and so much more than I could have hoped to find – is one-stop shopping.

The Community Indicators Initiative of Spokane County is the result of a massive project spearheaded by Eastern Washington University's Patrick Jones. He heads the Institute for Public Policy and Economic Analysis at EWU.

The site provides data on a wide array of subjects and areas of interest. People indicators cover everything from population rates to recreational bike paths to arts-related businesses to how many people use library services. And more.

Economic Vitality indicators include per capita income information, building permits, numbers of people who visited museums in the area and the number of patents awarded. And more.

There is detailed information about the basics: education, health, housing and transportation and public safety. And still more.

Last Wednesday, I spent the day at the first daylong Regional Conference on Community Indicators. The conference brought together people from the business, governmental, educational and nonprofit sectors to talk about the ways community indicators – data that measure and mark the general state of the community – are important to, and can be used and shared by all of us.

I listened to speakers and watched presentations and slide shows that demonstrated the importance of finding and measuring and making available to others the state of our community.

The purpose of the event was to highlight the ways that the data gathered and assimilated from a number of sources could be brought together and made accessible for anyone. It was a long day, but it was time well spent.

Thursday morning I e-mailed Jones and told him how much I'd enjoyed the conference and how fascinating I'd found it all.

I'm not a prospective resident any longer. I'm not even a real newcomer anymore, but I still find facts and figures about the area to be fascinating. But it's much more than that. Now that I live here, I have an even greater responsibility to educate myself about my home.

Jones put it best when he replied to my e-mail.

"If we, as a community, don't do much with all this knowledge," Jones wrote, "It will be a major opportunity lost."

When I went looking for facts and figures and information about this community just a few years ago, it took hours. It was frustrating and I still never got as deeply into things as I would have liked.

Now, thanks to the hard work of people with a vision, the vitals, the facts and figures that drive the pulse of the community aren't hard to find.

They are right at my fingertip.

Copyright 2007. Reprinted with permission of *The Spokesman-Review*. Permission is granted in the interest of public discussion and does not imply endorsement of any product, service or organization otherwise mentioned herein.