EWU institute creates data site to measure three counties

Economic indicator project focuses on Stevens, Ferry, and Pend Oreille counties

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An Eastern Washington University institute that developed Web-based data banks to track indicators about the Spokane, Walla Walla, and Wenatchee areas now has created such a site for three counties in the northeast corner of Washington.

EWU’s Institute for Public Policy and Economic Analysis expected this week to launch Northeast Washington Trends, a site that will track data for a tri-county area that includes Stevens, Pend Oreille, and Ferry counties.

Development of the Web site, located at www.northeastwashingtontrends.org, was funded using a $190,000 federal grant that also will be used this summer to create a similar site focused on Grant County, located southwest of Spokane and including Moses Lake, says Patrick Jones, director of the EWU institute.

The institute created the Community Indicators of Spokane site in 2006, in cooperation with the Inland Northwest Community Foundation. That site includes roughly 450 indicators and benchmarks, ranging from demographic and economic information to health, education, and environment. Since then, it has developed a site for the Port of Walla Walla and another for a collaboration of cities in north-central Washington that’s called Chelan Douglas Trends.

Jones says the new Northeast Washington Trends site was challenging to create because it includes independent data and trends for three separate counties, as well as aggregate data that treat the tri-county area as a whole.

“It has been a very ambitious project,” he says. “We’re proud of the site. It’s been a lot of work.”

The site shows the tri-county area’s population to be 64,700 as of last year, and that the population in that region grew 0.7 percent from the year earlier, compared with statewide population growth of 1.2 percent that year. Drilling down into individual counties, the site shows that the smallest of the three counties, Ferry, with 7,800 residents, had the highest rate of growth, at 1.2 percent. Pend Oreille County, with 12,900 residents, and Stevens County, with 44,000 residents, had growth roughly equivalent to the tri-county area combined.

Per-capita personal income in the three-county area was $26,507 in 2008, well below the statewide average of $42,747. Stevens County, the closest of the three counties to the Spokane metropolitan area, had the highest per-capita income of the three, at $27,068, while Ferry County had the lowest, at just $23,241. Spokane County’s per-capita income in 2008, by comparison, was $34,01.

Among the other data on the site, the tri-county’s overall unemployment rate last year was 12.8 percent, and the median home price in that region was $148,000, during the fourth quarter of 2009.

Although the roughly 400 indicators used on the site are similar to the other data banks the institute has developed, the site was tailored to the needs of that region. Jones says the scope of the indicators was determined with the help of seven focus groups convened in that area that included community members and representatives from local government, nonprofit groups, and businesses.

Jones says the new site is the result of a partnership between the EWU institute and the Tri County Economic Development District, which is based in Colville. The site is being unveiled this week and next at community meetings in each of the three counties.

Meanwhile, the institute has begun meeting with economic-development officials in Grant County to start work on that site, and plans to convene focus groups there in June, with an eye toward launching the site in late October.

Earlier this year, the institute also learned it will receive another federal grant, probably worth about $235,000, that likely will be used to create indicator sites for two other communities in the Inland Northwest, and also to do economic analysis of some targeted industries, as well as surveying of minority businesses in the Spokane area. The grants are intended to boost economic development in rural counties.

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