Economic data provided on website could help area businesses

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COEUR d'ALENE - D. Patrick Jones had some good news and some bad about Kootenai County's economy, and more still that was open to perspective.

Like how the county's average annual wage in 2011 was $32,647, roughly $3,000 below state and national averages.

Bad news? Maybe not.

"When you have lower wages, you're going to recruit businesses looking for that workforce," said Jones, executive director at the Institute for Public Policy and Economic Analysis at Eastern Washington University. "(The workforce) doesn't get paid a lot, but businesses might hire more people."

Also, county residents living below the federal poverty level ranged from 9.4 percent to 14.6 percent between 2000 and 2010, mostly below state and federal benchmarks.

"You might be low income, but a lot of people are low income," Jones said, addressing the crowd at the Coeur d'Alene Chamber of Commerce's Upbeat Breakfast at The Coeur d'Alene Resort on Tuesday. "The poverty isn't as pronounced as it is in Spokane, where it is almost twice as high, where we have a much great disparity between the wealthy, the median and the poor."

Whether such data gives an outlook that's bright or dim, it will aid local entities in tailoring their endeavors, Jones promised.

EWU has included Kootenai County in a study of community indicators in the Inland Northwest, which provides trend data for different areas. The project lays out 135 indicators about the county, spanning subjects like economic vitality, education, environment, health, tourism and public safety.

This information will prove crucial for writing grant applications, Jones said, as well as for fashioning business strategies.
"If I had known what I was dealing with say 10 years ago, I would've made very different decisions running my family business," said Jones, who said he had to close the clothing store he used to own in Coeur d'Alene. "I think this does have value for locally owned businesses."

On Tuesday morning, Jones provided a peek into the data now compiled at www.kootenaicountyindicators.org, which will be updated regularly by EWU students.

Jones highlighted the county's still swelling population, though the growth rate has slowed from 6.5 percent in 1993 to 1.6 percent in 2011.

An increasing population can help businesses stay afloat, Jones said.

The indicators also confirm the county's median age has increased for the past several years.

The median age was 39 in 2010, up from 36.9 in 2005.

"In half a decade, it's gone up quite a bit," Jones said, noting that the trend could affect voter turnout and what merchandise businesses focus on.

He also pointed out that the county has nearly 4,000 individuals working in tourism, about 8 percent of the county's total employment.

"No county in Eastern Washington has this much reliance and emphasis on tourism," he said.

Most of the data is a year old, Jones noted after the presentation, so it's tricky to pinpoint how healthy the county's economy is today by the data.

"I would guess, if I had to hazard a guess, that Kootenai County will not pick up until the housing market recovers," he said, which he believed will be boosted by the still rising population.

The project was driven by several agencies, primarily the Coeur d'Alene chamber and United Way.

It was funded by a congressional appropriation and the Inland Northwest Community Foundation, according to the website.

Jim Williamson, with Coeur d'Alene construction business Williamson Johnson Company, said indicators on the website could help his business identify how to adapt to economic trends.

"Everybody who struggles with long-term decisions is always looking for the most information you can get," Williamson said.
Jan Scharnweber, working with Panhandle Area Council, said she has written grant applications recently and the indicators are "dynamite" for that purpose.

The site could also reveal business opportunities for entrepreneurs, she added.

"Using this just to guide them as a resource in making their decisions is huge," Scharnweber said.

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