GC Information at the click of a mouse

BY LAUREN McLAUGHLIN of the Journal

EPHRATA — Ever wonder how many homes are for sale in Grant County, how the county’s youth smoking rates compare to the state overall, or some other esoteric bit of data or demographic information?

The Grant County Trends website has it covered.

Launched in November 2010, the site, www.grantcountytrends.ewu.edu, is a cooperative project developed by the Grant County Economic Development Council and Eastern Washington University to provide pertinent, updated information on the health and economic well-being of the county and its residents.

The website hosts a range of data on a variety of different subjects including agriculture, economic vitality, education, environment, land use, health, housing, transportation, public safety, and recreation/tourism.

“It serves as a tool for evaluating the ‘health’ of our community,” GCEDC managing director Jonathan Smith said this morning by e-mail. “Similar to how we use cholesterol level, blood pressure, and heart rate as indicators of our personal health, we can use educational attainment, employment and crimes per 1,000 residents as indicators of our community health.”

By request, researchers in Eastern Washington University’s Institute for Public Policy and Economic Analysis collect and analyze the raw data and put it into a user-friendly form for citizens, agencies, and anyone looking at moving to or starting a business in Grant County.

Visitors to the website can click through a variety of categories and subcategories to find interesting information. The information is presented in a collection of graphs and side-by-side comparison to the state as a whole in the same category.

“The idea behind the website is to democratize data,” said Anna Halloran, community indicators manager at EWU. “We want to make the data available to everyone who is interested.”

“A lot times when you’re looking for specific information, you’re stuck pouring through dozens of government websites trying to find facts,” said Hal- loran.

Researchers collect data from numerous government agencies and other reputable sources and put the information in one centralized location.

“Grant County Trends is like a one-stop-shop to get all the information you need,” said Halloran.

Over 140 indicators, such crimes rates and educational levels, are tracked by the researchers. Sometimes the data is just taken directly from its original source and uploaded right onto Grant County Trends, but other times raw data needs to be analyzed and put together in a manner that makes sense for Grant County, said Halloran.

For example, she said, the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, releases data about education by individual school districts, not by county. So researchers analyze information specific to schools within Grant County for the website.

It’s a very valuable resource, said Grant County Commissioner Carolann Swartz during a recent county health board meeting.

Grant County Health District administrator Jeff Ketchel noted local officials have utilized the wealth of information while working on recent projects.

“The health district, the EDC, the Columbia Basin Foundation, local newspapers, many other organizations and businesses and even local citizens use the website to research information about the county,” said Smith. “Information about the county can be compared to the state and nation to help put it into perspective.”

Smith and Halloran both said businesses, non-profit organizations and public agencies can use the information to help make decisions about the best places to invest, or build new businesses. Charitable groups can find out what areas or groups in the county would most benefit from the organization’s donations or efforts.

“We’ve seen a really great response. It has received attention from sources both inside and outside Grant County,” said Halloran, noting that inquiries or site visits have come from such places as Seattle, Spokane, and Olympia. “It shows outside sources are curious about the county.”

Halloran and the other members of the Institute of Public Policy and Economic Analysis want to ensure the indicators tracked are utilizing the most recent data. Through a notification system, the EWU researchers track the release of new material to get the most up-to-date information possible.

“The website is constantly evolving. We’re constantly checking for new data to be released,” said Halloran. “We try to make sure any information that does get updated gets up on the website within two weeks of being released.”

Grant County Trends is one of six trending websites operated by EWU’s Institute for Public Policy and Economic Analysis.

“Everyone should have a resource like this,” said Halloran, who hopes other counties in the state ultimately utilize a trends website.