Signs of the counties
EWU project building Web site to display tri-county statistics, data

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Of The Miner

COLVILLE – In April this year, an institute at Eastern Washington University gained federal funding for a project compiling population trends and statistics for Inland Northwest counties and posting them on the Internet.

Now, that same institute is working on a similar Web site for the tri-county area.

Executive director Patrick Jones from EWU’s Institute for Public Policy and Economic Analysis said by Christmas, his work group may know which data trends to track for the three counties. They’re aiming to launch the site in April or May next year – but they do have one more topic to tackle: tourism.

Jones organized six work groups of community members and local policymakers, each group focused on a topic of statistics: health, schools and education, economic vitality and public safety to name a few.

Already, Pend Oreille County community members have had a strong showing. In the economic vitality focus group, Jones said out of 25 people, nine were Pend Oreille County representatives. Public Utility District commissioner Dan Peterson was one of those representatives.

Each group comes up with the indicators they would like the Web site to display.

“That’s the fun part for us. None of these become a template for other sites,” Jones said, adding that the work group process makes each county’s site something different.

Based on the feedback he’s hearing from the work groups, Jones is organizing a focus group for “tourism and recreation.” Like the other groups, the new team will need to identify the “indicators” they would like to see.

Indicators for the tri-county Web site have not been finalized, but indicators for other counties that have gone through the same process include determining the living wage, alternative enrollment, or median household income.

The purpose behind the project, Jones said, is to empower local decision making.

“What we do is facilitate the process where the community decides what they want, and the way we put it makes it more understandable,” Jones said, referring to line and bar graphs generated from the statistics uncovered at the institute.

Once an indicator is decided upon, the institute’s workers and researchers figure out where they find the data. Often, federal and state governments or departments provide the information necessary. On more complicated issues, like the living wage, “we had to come up with some attempt to measure what many toss around as a known fact,” Jones said.
By correlating data from local entities with data from other spreadsheets of data, the work may sound too technical for human hands, but the institute uses students “in part, because we like to be more hands-on,” Jones said.

Often, data comes in different formats, and data entry is one of the only ways to keep the numbers accurate. Graduate students in economics or statistics perform the work updating Web sites for Chelan and Douglas counties, Walla Walla County, and Spokane County.

Having available graduate students to work on the project is one of the reasons the university institute is taking on the project. Jones said he believes it’s important for the university to be involved in the communities. One of the ways they can give back is presenting policymakers with the data, most of which is already posted to the Internet. Despite being available, the data may not be easily presentable or accessible, Jones said.

The Chelan and Douglas counties’ Web site, available at www.chelandouglastrends.ewu.edu, gives a good example of how multiple counties could share the statistics. With each work group’s topics on the bar to the right, the Web site mostly displays data for the combined counties. However, a “Compare” button at the bottom of the navigation column opens a tool that allows users to view graphs of each county’s data overlaid on each other.

The cost to set up one of these community statistics sites can be pretty high. When Tri-County Economic Development District (TEDD) reviewed it for the county, the expense appeared to outweigh the benefit. However, $190,000 in federal funding secured by Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., will pay for the initial process and compilation of data. At present, the institute is working a Web site for Grant County and a joint site for Pend Oreille, Stevens and Ferry.

The budgeted cost for the tri-county site is $117,000, which, divided by three, is less than the initial start-up cost of $42,000 for Walla Walla’s community indicator site. The Port of Walla Walla paid for the start up.

The federal grant, though, pays only for the start of the project. The three counties, Jones said, will have to come up with a way to maintain the Web site, which is updated weekly or as new data appears. Jones estimated the upkeep for the tri-county site could be $15,000.

As part of the maintenance fee, though, the counties would be able to continue to refine the data. Adding a new indicator to the Web site would not be hard at all, Jones said, explaining that part of the project includes adding three to five new indicators annually. The site, like its data would continue to be updated over time, showing the more relevant data local leaders are looking for, Jones said. Since 2006, the Spokane County site had gone through two different substantial revisions – with a third coming in the spring.

“They’re dynamic products and should change over time,” Jones said, adding that participants got a better sense of what they should be looking for as they used them.