Data diggers, here’s a gold mine

By Alivia Body
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Eastern Washington University’s Institute for Public Policy and Economic Analysis has collaborated with United Way of Kootenai County, and a number of Kootenai County organizations to establish a one-stop shop for data — a data enthusiast’s dream!

“Our goal is to create and maintain a website that will provide information about our community,” said Caryl Johnston, executive director of United Way. In doing this, it is our intent that the data collected would meet the following criteria:

• It would be current, reliable and consistent;
• It would be scientifically defensible;
• It would measure indicators identified as important by members of our community;
• It would be readily available to anyone in the community;
• It would be unambiguous in its interpretation.

This data, once collected, could be used by a wide variety of organizations, business, governmental agencies and individuals both to understand our community and to make strategic decisions about how best to improve Kootenai County.

More than 100 people around the community representing local government, businesses and nonprofit organizations have participated in the indicator selection process. The site, which is expected to launch as early as next spring, will include indicators within several main categories including population, economic vitality, education, environment/land use, health, housing/transportation, public safety and recreation/tourism.

The goal of the Community Indicators Initiative site is to generate a one-stop shop, easy-to-use resource for citizens, local government, non-profits and businesses. The intention is to democratize data — to make data available to all — and for people to utilize it as a tool for evidence-based decision making.

The indicators site will serve as a valuable tool to identify where our community excels, as well as where we may have pressing community challenges. In other communities, similar projects have served to inspire dialogue and strategy that leads to change in the community. The intent is to help the community to prioritize community action that will lead to measurable improvements, in order to measure change of identified issues over time.

Making measurable change in our community requires community-wide action through collaboration of agencies and organizations. In the end, the Kootenai Indicators project will act
as a catalyzing force in the community, raising awareness of issues, engaging in community action, developing collaborations and raising funds to carry out proven solutions to improving our community.

Patrick Jones, director of the EWU Institute for Public Policy and Analysis, and his team already maintain a data collection for Spokane and seven other eastern Washington counties. Funding has become possible by Washington State Senators Maria Cantwell and Patty Murray upon agreeing that Kootenai and Spokane counties share a similar economy. The two sources of money for the Kootenai County Community Indicators Initiative project are Inland Northwest Community Foundation and Congress.

Alivia Body is a regional economist for the Idaho Department of Labor. Caryl Johnston from United Way of Kootenai County contributed to this report.