Our World: It's how we use data that counts

By Rufus Woods, Editor and Publisher, The Wenatchee World
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One of the encouraging signs in our region is the extent to which communities and counties are finding new ways to work together. Cooperation trumps competition in these matters every time because the more we can think regionally rather than parochially, the better off all of us will be.

The latest example of this involves a collaborative effort that has brought together businesses, cities, counties and other public agencies throughout Chelan and Douglas counties to develop and publish a series of key indicators that will give us a basis on which to make decisions on a wide variety of critical community issues.

It's called the Chelan-Douglas Trends project and it involves collecting and publishing trend data about issues such as economic development, transportation, health care, education and the environment and then benchmarking those results against state averages to provide adequate context.

As Chelan County Commissioner Keith Goehner pointed out, without having hard data decision makers are forced to rely on instincts and anecdotal information. Making decisions based on verifiable data is good policy whether you're a city official or a business owner.

In watching the Chelan-Douglas Trends process unfold over the past nine months, it has been encouraging to see the amount of enthusiasm it has generated. Financial support has been forthcoming cities, counties, ports, other public agencies and local businesses.

Perhaps a better litmus test for the appeal of this project is the amount of participation by individuals. More than 200 people have served on focus groups to discuss and debate which trends were most important to include in the Web site. They’ve been looking for numbers that show successes and also trends that indicate where we can make improvements. When this project is launched in November with a Web site displaying the data in an easy-to-use format, there will be more than 145 trends that will be included.

The key instigator of this project is Beth Stipe of the Community Foundation of North Central Washington. She and Chelan County Planner John Guenther co-chair the Chelan-Douglas Trends effort.

Stipe said that having data is important, but it's what the public and elected officials do with that information that can help transform this region. If, for example, a trend is identified by a committee that, say, teen pregnancy is a problem that needs to be addressed given the data, an opportunity exists to rally resources in the community to improve those numbers.

Stipe says having hard numbers and context will help "take the emotion" out of discussing important issues. People will be able to move beyond opinions and anecdotes and instead focus on what's really happening.
Community indicator efforts are already under way in a number of communities across the country. Eastern Washington University has been instrumental in developing and supporting similar projects in Spokane and most recently Walla Walla and is doing the data collection and design work for Chelan-Douglas Trends.

What's this going to mean for our region? Non-profits are chomping at the bit to use the data this generates to develop grant proposals to bring additional resources to our communities, businesses looking to relocate here will have better data to make that decision and civic leaders and the community will have real data about the state of our communities with which to make important decisions.

The Chelan-Douglas Trends project will help move this region forward.

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