Let's take a look at the numbers

By Rufus Woods, Editor and publisher, The World
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Something fascinating happened at Wenatchee's Confluence Technology Center last Thursday.

A diverse group of more than 40 leaders representing social service agencies, local governments, businesses and education institutions came together to hear a presentation about developing a database of community indicators to help assess how our communities are doing on key economic and quality-of-life issues.

At the end of that three-hour discussion, they passed around a microphone and every single individual endorsed the concept. Getting that much support that quickly is almost unheard of.

The Community Foundation of North Central Washington convened the meeting and invited Patrick Jones of Eastern Washington University's Institute for Public Policy and Economic Analysis to describe the work being done for the Community Indicators Initiative of Spokane. The university gathers the data and has developed a Web site that's easy to use and very understandable.

Jones described the Web site as a one-stop shop that gives people in the community a framework for having meaningful discussions about the issues confronting the city and county. In Spokane, it has become an important tool for planners, civic groups and social service agencies to more fully understand issues that need to be addressed. Having actual trend data, said Jones, tends to take the emotion out of discussions. People may still disagree about causes and responses, but it gives the community a baseline from which to understand its unique circumstances.

When the Spokane project began three or four years ago, the steering committee members agreed on some common guidelines. They felt it was critical to show trends, not just results from a single year. They wanted to benchmark the local results with other communities or state and national numbers to provide some additional context, and they wanted the numbers to be transparent, so when you look at the graphs you can easily drill down to the numbers and see the source of the data.

Absent good data, you're left with anecdotal information, guesswork and in some cases statistics without a lot of context, which is often where we find ourselves as we debate issues in the Wenatchee Valley these days.

So how could a community indicators initiative work here?

Focus groups would be organized around some common topic areas, such as public safety, housing, health, the environment, education and economic vitality. Those groups would determine what data the community needs for each topic area to better understand how well our communities are doing. Eastern Washington University would process the data and could even update the numbers as they changed from year to year.

Based on the work that EWU has done with Spokane, there are 145 or so indicators that could be used in the Wenatchee Valley. The data already exists — it's only a matter of deciding which metrics make sense for our region.

This is not a very expensive project, either. The process to develop the key indicators and the databases is somewhere in the $40,000 to $60,000 range, and updating the numbers is likely cost about $20,000 per year.

I see great potential for using actual trend data to inform our decisions on such issues as affordable housing and economic development, rather than just gut feelings and blind assumptions. A Wenatchee Valley Community Indicators Project would be a constructive way to move our communities forward.

This is a project that needs to be done, and soon.

Rufus Woods is editor and publisher of The Wenatchee World. Reach him at rwoods@wenworld.com or 665-1162.