

Walla Walla Trends report highlights local ethnic, job mixes Higher proportions of Latinos and government jobs set the county apart.

Vicki Hillhouse

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WALLA WALLA - Walla Walla County has relatively fewer minority populations but more government jobs and more insured adults than other Washington communities, according to recently compiled data from Walla Walla Trends.

Though the Hispanic population is a larger proportion of the community than most others in the state, the area has a less diverse minority population overall, the information shows.

At the same time, Walla Walla's employment structure shows a different kind of diversity. Government jobs make up the largest share of our nonagricultural employment. And with a greater percentage of higher paying government jobs, it may be no surprise that more adults here are insured compared to figures from the rest of the state and country.

The information on the community was gleaned through Walla Walla Trends, a Web-based collection of painstakingly gathered data in about 100 categories.

These particular items were pulled for analysis for the Walla Walla Trends newsletter, a quarterly publication that highlights specific trends that help add more dimension to the informational snapshot of Walla Walla.

The work is a partnership between the Port of Walla Walla and Eastern Washington University's Institute of Public Policy and Economic Analysis. The report is intended to help provide a picture of community dynamics. The information can be used by residents and policy-makers as they plan for the region's future.

Moreover, the data helps to put aside sweeping generalizations made through anecdotal evidence about the community, said Patrick Jones, director of Eastern's Institute of Public Policy and Economic Analysis.

Jones presented some of the findings at a recent meeting of the Port's Economic Development Advisory Committee.

In a telephone conversation Thursday he said the purpose of the trends project, and similar ones in other Washington communities, is "to try to get a better set of information to a broad group of residents."

Indicator analysis on the latest data was prepared by Jones and Sarah Reynolds, project coordinator for the Institute of Public Policy and Economic Analysis.

Here's what they found:

Population Mix

Other minority groups in Walla Walla are a shadow compared to the population of Hispanics in the community.

Since 2000, the Hispanic population across the county has increased from 15.7 percent to almost 20 percent in 2008. The 25 percent growth rate is similar to the 24 percent increase across the rest of the state. However, in Walla Walla's case, the overall share size is significantly larger than the rest of Washington, where the Hispanic population increased from 7.5 percent in 2000 to 9.3 percent in 2008.

At the same time in 2008, people of African American, Asian or American Indian descent made up only 4.6 percent of the population, the report showed. (These race categories may include people of Hispanic heritage, since Hispanics are an ethnic group and can be of any race.)

Those who claim two or more races hold only 1.7 percent of the population. Neither of those racial categories has changed much since 2000. The plateau was reflected across the state, as well, but at higher levels.

Native Americans make up about 1 percent of the county's population; Asians and Pacific Islanders account for 1.8 percent, the same share held by African Americans.

In their report, Reynolds and Jones said the significance of the diversity takes on a new meaning in terms of language. According to Census data cited in the report, about 15 percent of all people 5 and older in Walla Walla County speak primarily Spanish. Most speak English, as well, the analysis concluded, but it is secondary to Spanish. The information can be used to help community services, schools and businesses better serve the local residents, the report said.

Employment Structure

Government jobs made up 23 percent of Walla Walla's marketshare in 2008. That share of the market is 4.8 percentage points higher than communities across the state, according to the report.

The presence of the Washington State Penitentiary, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Walla Walla School District provide the foundation for government employment, said Port Economic Development Director Paul Gerola.

In addition to being the largest employment sector, government also has the highest paid workers on average in terms of wages earned per sector, the report explained.

Behind government, and reflecting the trend across the state, the largest employment sectors are manufacturing, health care and social assistance and retail trade.

What makes Walla Walla different is that those sectors -- with the exception of retail -- account for a larger portion of the job market than in other Washington communities.

"It is a different structure," Jones said. "If you're trying to dodge the bullet of the recession, it's not a bad mix to have."

With the exception of the retail trade -- which has about the same share locally (10.7 percent) as

statewide (11 percent) -- Walla Walla's share in these sectors is bigger.

Manufacturing accounted for 13.7 percent of the market share in 2008 in Walla Walla. That's down from 17.7 percent in 2000. That reflects a shrinkage in overall manufacturing employment. Meanwhile, the health care sector climbed slightly from 14 percent in 2000 to 14.9 percent in 2008.

Uninsured adults

According to the report, 14 percent of people in Walla Walla County between 18 and 64 don't have any health insurance coverage.

Not good news in general. But it's better than the rest of the state, where the uninsured rate is 16 percent, the Trends report concluded.

It gets better: The rate of uninsured people in Walla Walla appears to be declining.

The share of uninsured, noninstitutionalized adults between 18 and 64 dropped five percentage points from the 2004-2006 period of reporting to the last period 2007-2008.

"That is a significant drop, and one that the county can be proud of," the report said. Though Washington's and the nation's rates declined, they only showed a drop of one percentage point each over the same period.

It is hard to say what exactly this might mean for the county but the numbers basically suggest that more working age adults now have access to health care than before," the report said.

"If we can assume that to mean that more people will seek preventative care or get help for chronic conditions, then the higher rate could mean that Walla Walla's residents will become healthier."

Vicki Hillhouse can be reached at vickihillhouse@wwub.com or 526-8321.

<http://union-bulletin.com/stories/2010/02/05/walla-walla-trends-report-highlights-local-ethnic-job-mixes>, accessed on 3.3.2010