

Web site offers insight into Valley

Walla Walla Trends gathers data policy makers and residents can use to plan for the future.

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WALLA WALLA -- A snapshot of the community based on easily accessed market data: Historic farm town with rolling hills, family values, major employment in the government sector, slow population growth and a booming wine industry that's sparked tourism.

A sharper portrait with state and federal data available on new Web site, Walla Walla Trends: A historic farm community which compared to the rest of Washington has more arts-related businesses per capita, more people who've attended community college, a greater portion of taxes paid to public education and yet more residents living in poverty based on a higher number of children enrolled in free and reduced lunch programs.

The new Web site, unveiled Thursday by the Port of Walla Walla, is a collection of painstakingly gathered data in 95 categories intended to provide a clearer picture of community dynamics. The information is expected to help policy makers and residents plan with a more factual understanding of the region.

"The more information we have on Walla Walla County that we can post, get out to the citizens, the better we can make decisions for the future of Walla Walla," said Port Executive Director Jim Kuntz.

The project was the result of a partnership between the Port and Eastern Washington University's Institute of Public Policy and Economic Analysis. Funding for the project was provided by the Port and the Washington State Department of Community, Trade & Economic Development. Kuntz said the cost to develop the site was \$41,469. The Port has a one-year maintenance contract at \$14,450.

More than 50 people gathered for the unveiling of the site at Walla Walla Community College on Thursday morning. Eastern Washington University President Rodolfo ArÃ©valo joined the team from the university's public policy institute. Also attending were representatives from Tourism Walla Walla, Valley Transit, the city, Walla Walla Public Schools, the Community Council and the office of U.S. Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash., among many others.

Port Commission President Fred Bennett, who opened the 7:30 a.m. presentation Thursday, said the information could have numerous applications for the community.

"We're interested in our future based on some of the things in our past," he said.

Walla Walla resident Mary Campbell attended the unveiling and said the information will contribute to important decisions for the Valley. "This is truly a foundational contribution to the Walla Walla region's future," she said.

Patrick Jones, executive director of Eastern's Institute for Public Policy & Economic Analysis said the challenge for nonmetropolitan communities such as Walla Walla is the lack of reliable data at the state and federal levels. Jones and other team members spent nine months gleaning information related to people, economic vitality, education, environment, health, housing/transportation and public safety.

The result, Jones said, is a "bountiful harvest of information."

Visitors to the site can easily learn that Walla Walla County matches the state average, and in some cases exceeds it, in voter turnout; generally has better rates than the state average of on-time high school graduation; and averages more individual urban water consumption than Spokane County.

Port officials emphasized the information is not intended to categorize needs or rank trends as positive or negative.

"We're going to leave it to the citizens to access the information and apply it," Kuntz said.

He said Walla Walla Trends should be looked at as "a process, and not a product," which means it can be changed and adapted as visitors to the site identify further areas of research.

For Jones, who led a similar project in Spokane, the real measure of the site's success will come in the future.

"The litmus test is three to five years," he said. "You'll know whether better decisions are being made."

To see the site visit www.wallawallatrends.com

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