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Banner year for approved patents

Tom Sowa
Staff writer
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For the first time in more than a decade, Spokane County inventors landed more than 100 patents in a single year last year.

At the same time, the past decade shows that Spokane's rate of patent success is flat and falling behind the statewide rate.

In 2009, individuals or companies in Spokane received 75 patents from the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

In 2010, it reached 105, the largest single-year number in recent decades.

But that one-year bump doesn't hide the fact that Spokane has been generally flat in number of patents issued, while Washington state's number of patents awarded has been increasing since 2005.

Those conclusions appear in the spring newsletter of the nonprofit Spokane Community Indicators Initiative, a data resource maintained by Eastern Washington University.

The analysis, written by indicators manager Anna Halloran, tracked the number of patents approved locally and regionally.

Patents approved are viewed as a manifestation of economic development potential, said Patrick Jones, executive director of EWU's Institute for Public Policy and Economic Analysis. That agency collects data from Spokane County and other areas of Eastern Washington for the indicators project.

"Patents are not the whole story, but they're a significant part of the story of technology-based economic development," Jones said.

The newsletter notes that statewide, the number of patents issued grew by more than 130 percent from 2005 to 2010.

During the same time period in Spokane County, the number of patents issued grew by 57 percent, which was largely due to the spike last year, the report said.

Jones and others contend that Spokane's leaders need to look at the region's patent numbers and re-examine efforts here to upgrade the economy, grow new businesses and boost the overall per-capita income of the county's residents.

"We need to begin a discussion about this issue," Jones said.

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