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Spokane still behind, but working to move ahead

By [Lynda V. Mapes](#)
Seattle Times staff reporter

SPOKANE — Viewed from a world of snarled roads and carnivorous home prices, Spokane can be a delicious exception, a place of porch swings, cheap homes, open roads and public schools not yet overrun — a Mecca for the middle class.

This is Washington's second-largest city, but it's motto could be "Slow and Steady." Once powered by agriculture, mining and timber, Spokane's economic underpinnings now include high-tech, telecommunications, medical services and a robust service and retail base.

But for all the city's advantages, and despite its isolation, the nation's recession has a grip on Spokane. In just the past 12 months, Spokane County has had a net loss of 6,300 jobs, half in manufacturing.

"What we have seen in the last several years is one of the more dramatic drop-offs in jobs than we have seen in the last 20 years, maybe 50," said Randy Barcus, chief economist for Avista Utilities.

Foreclosures are climbing and may top 1,200 this year, up from just 70 in 1993.



[enlarge](#) ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Students attending a Washington State University summer camp check out the renovated lobby of Spokane's historic Davenport Hotel, first built in 1914.

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For the unemployed, landing decent-paying work is the stuff of dreams. Spokane is no stranger to the \$9-to-12-an-hour job, with no benefits.

And no other major metro area in Washington had as high a percentage of families living in poverty, 2000 census data shows.

"Spokane has low average wages and median income relative to the rest of the state," said Sen. Lisa Brown, D-Spokane, an economist and chairman of the Senate Ways and Means Committee. "There is a sense of being left behind."

The average annual wage in Spokane County in 2000 was \$29,753. That's about \$7,300 lower than the statewide average of \$37,070, according to data from the Department of Employment Security.

More than half of all workers in Spokane County are in retail trade and service industries, earning annual wages of \$17,667 and \$24,395, respectively, in 2000, the most recent figures available.

Some of the once highest-paying blue-collar jobs in town — \$17 an hour in base wages at Kaiser Aluminum's smelter in Mead — are probably gone for good; there are no current plans to reopen the plant.

But some believe the bottom has been reached: The rate of growth in retail sales in the second quarter of 2002 has picked up over the first quarter.

"People are starting to release the tightness of the purse strings. I am cautiously optimistic that trend will continue," Barcus said.

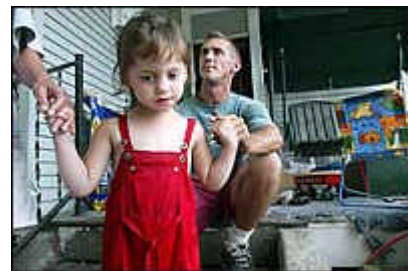
Retail development is also flourishing in the Spokane Valley east of downtown, a community of 80,800 that voted in May to incorporate.

Cheap housing helps

If there is a silver lining, it may be Spokane's cheap housing. The median home price was \$104,600 in the first quarter of 2002, compared with \$247,600 in Seattle, \$166,800 in Tacoma and \$175,700 in Portland, according to the Spokane Association of Realtors.

Even renting in Spokane is less than in Clark, Snohomish, Pierce and King counties, according to the 2000 census. Median monthly rents were \$532 in Spokane County; \$758 in King, \$624 in Pierce and \$766 in Snohomish.

And at just 19 minutes, Spokane also had the shortest mean commute among those same counties, census data also shows. In King County, it's 26.5 minutes.



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Alexis Sams, 3, has no health insurance. Her dad, Chris Sams, right, was laid off almost a year ago, and her mother (holding her hand), Michele Boisoneau, makes \$9.29 an hour.

Michele Boissoneau, 34, formerly of Kent, says she has it better in Spokane, despite supporting five children on her job as a nurse's aide for \$9.29 an hour with no health insurance.

"My company offers it," Boissoneau said. "But you take a cut in pay and pay a monthly fee."

For Boissoneau, vacation is camping for free at the state park; her car is a 1989 Geo: "real cheesy, but it gets 35 miles per gallon;" and home is a two-bedroom duplex for \$475 a month.

"That's cheaper than Seattle," Boissoneau points out. "I came here because the cost of living was better, and it was better to raise kids. I lived in the Kent and Federal Way area, and there were too many gangs moving in."

With a ninth-grade education, Boissoneau said she feels lucky to have her job. It's just six blocks from home, and she enjoys the elderly residents she works with. "I like hearing all the old stories."

But while housing costs are low compared with west of the Cascades, wages have not kept pace.

Boissoneau's sister-in-law, Ravelle Petersen, 26, is pregnant with her fourth child and living on a part-time, \$7-an-hour job hostessing at a diner. Her husband has been out of work for months.

"They think people can live on nothing," she said of employers. "It just seems you work and you work and you never get anywhere."

Wade Shaw, 27, paused while shoveling gravel in the July heat with a landscaping crew to say he hopes for better-paying work than his \$12 an hour job with no benefits. He started out in the job at \$6.50 an hour four years ago.

He is trying for a job as a corrections officer at the state prison outside town, which would pay \$31,000 a year.

His wife works as a secretary part time because the cost of child care for their 4-month-old baby would leave them with only \$60 more at the end of the month if she worked full time.

Spokane grows up

There are bright spots in Spokane's economy.

Barcus, the economist from Avista, forecasts modest employment growth of about 2 percent a year over the next 10 years, continuing Spokane's steady-as-she-goes pattern. Indeed, some businesses have seen little or no economic downturn, skipping the recession entirely.



[enlarge](#) ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Landscaper Guy Madison's goal is to

have his own business and he's been learning the trade for four years.

Shanda Shepherd, 31, says even after Sept. 11, her health- and gourmet-food store has remained profitable.

Her business, the Rocket Market on Spokane's South Hill, a neighborhood of leafy streets and porch swings, has prospered with an eclectic food inventory, including 200 varieties of microbrew beer at \$1.30 a bottle and gourmet chocolate at \$2 for a bar half the length of a business card.

She sees lots of changes since moving to Spokane from Yakima at age 10.

"Spokane to me? It's safe. It still has a small-town feel, but it is getting a bigger-town tolerance," she says.

She sees more gay bars, more vegetarian restaurants, and a city suited not just to retirees but young families and entrepreneurs.

To her Spokane is the land of the possible, with affordable homes, little traffic and few hassles. Reservations? Who needs them. Parking? No problem. In Spokane the shocker isn't finding a spot, it's having to pay for it at all. The hurdles Puget Sounders face widen eyes over here.

"My sister is talking about buying a \$300,000 house in Puyallup. That is more than my net worth," Shepherd said, aghast.

That livability is an asset business leaders key on to market Spokane as a regional center of the Inland Northwest. Spokane is a regional hub of retail, government, higher education and medical service. It's the largest commercial and employment center between the Cascade crest and the Twin Cities.

A new \$114 million mall downtown, anchored with a Nordstrom store, has transformed the formerly forlorn-looking town center into an attractive retail core, a triumph blighted by a long-running feud between developers of the project and the city over the mall's parking-garage revenues.

The dispute has sparked a flurry of lawsuits and resulted in a downgrading of the city's bond rating and years of bad PR. It may be headed to resolution through mediation talks.

Despite the squabbling, a new library, a downtown bus terminal, art museum and convention-center expansion just approved at the ballot by city voters show a continued willingness of city voters, politicians and business owners to invest in Spokane.

When the historic Davenport Hotel reopened last month after being closed for decades, nearly 11,000 people lined up around the block throughout a sweltering summer weekend to shake the hands of owners Walt and Karen Worthy and have a look inside.

The restoration, costing more than \$30 million, preserved all of the gilt and glamour of the 1914 hotel, a Northwest show piece.

Walt Worthy, a perfectionist, dissected mattresses with a box cutter to find the



most comfortable night's sleep. He sourced crab for the restaurant's sumptuous crab cakes from the same wholesaler as The Breakers hotel in Palm Beach, Fla.



[enlarge](#)

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He has silver-plated dog dishes on order for his guests' pets. Bar stools in the lounge are upholstered in alligator and wholesaled for \$1,500 each.

Spokane is home to one of the country's largest races, the Bloomsday Run, and David Govedare's sculpture in Riverfront Park celebrates the event.

Worthy says his restoration was a labor of love, but also a wise investment. He has confidence in Spokane and says the city needs an attitude adjustment and higher expectations for itself.

"There is a can't-do attitude rather than can do. I believe in the 'build it and they will come' approach.

"Plant more bushes in the arterials, then water them after they plant them and pull the paper out of them. It's pride of ownership. It's despicable not to, just plain damn laziness."

Worthy and others see the Spokane River, which winds through the heart of the city, as a resource for civic pride and economic development.

"We have done a terrible job marketing it," Worthy said.

A 30-mile trail runs east along the river all the way to Idaho, and Riverfront Park embraces the river at the city's heart. But the gorge west of town is disconnected from the trail, and from Riverside State Park downstream.

Beyond a loyal cadre of nude bathers, no one has made much of the lovely riffing run of river not 10 minutes west of downtown.

The Spokane Tribe and Friends of the Falls, a citizens group, is working with city planners to change that, by linking the east and west ends of the river with a trail.

Plans are in discussion to create a tribal cultural center in a former restaurant overlooking falls that crash through the heart of downtown.

As the city works to push past the recession, showcasing the river to emphasize the city's quality of life is a no-brainer some say.

"It's about identity and pride of place," said Rick Hastings, president of Friends of the Falls. "We have a world-class river that nobody sees."

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