

# Quality of Life in Bonner County, Idaho

## Strengths, Weaknesses, Possibilities

Reproduced in the pages that follow are a series of essays on quality of life in Bonner County, Idaho that appeared originally in the Bonner County Daily Bee over the period October 2005 to late Spring 2006. The essays are being republished in this booklet form to make them available to those who missed seeing some or all of them before. It is hoped that their republication will help to sustain and nourish a community concern about and involvement in raising the quality of life in the County.

The essays were prepared under the auspices of S.E.E.D. (Seeking Equal Economic Development). Comprised of individual citizens and representatives of area care agencies, S.E.E.D. is committed to help create a community in which every citizen can realize and experience a good quality of life.

The statistics contained in the essays are accurate as of the time of writing. The essays have been edited from their original form for inclusion in this booklet.

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## **1. Introduction**

**by Nancy Gerth and Charles Glock**

All of us, it seems fair to say, would like to feel that our community affords a high quality of life for all of its citizens. And most of us would probably agree about the attributes our community ought to have. To begin with, we want our community to be a safe place in which to live. We want it to afford decent housing, a livable income and access to health care for everyone. Quality

educational opportunities are desired as are a diverse and growing economy, a sustainable environment and an efficient transportation system. We also hope that our community offers ample opportunities for recreation, and for spiritual, artistic and musical expression. A community that has these things will show it through a high degree of community pride and involvement.

While we know what we'd like our community to be, we rarely pause to take stock of how well it measures up to our aspirations. What is the quality of life in our community? What can we be proud of and what not so proud? What can we do to overcome our weaknesses and sustain our strengths? How can we prepare for the growth that the future seems sure to bring? Believing these questions worthy of being addressed, the members of S.E.E.D. have been engaged for some time in seeking answers to them. The following essays focus on housing, health care, education, employment, aging, the environment, volunteerism, arts and recreation, as well as other topics.

By taking stock of how we are doing in each of these areas, we hope that the essays will 1) make us more aware of quality of life issues in our community, (2) help us to recognize more fully our strengths and weaknesses, (3) stimulate us alone and together to think about how we might do better and (4) do it.

Each of the essays addresses possibilities for furthering the pursuit of these objectives. It is hoped that readers will feel encouraged to participate in helping these possibilities to be realized as well as to take innovative steps on their own to raise the quality of life in our community. We encourage you to make these essays the topic of a reading and discussion group in your church or civic organization -- or just with you neighbors. Other communities in the United State as well as elsewhere in the world have learned that quality of life can be raised through efforts similar to the one we are undertaking here. Given our community spirit, there is no reason that we cannot do as well or better. Here's hoping you'll get on board and participate in the effort. Your comments are respectfully invited.

## **2. Affordable Housing**

**by Brenda Hammond**

Judging from the rising costs of real estate and the number of new homes, Bonner County is enjoying a boom in housing never experienced before. Certainly, this is good news for developers, and for those who own their own homes or who can afford to buy and occupy the luxury homes that are being

built. The boom is also welcomed for the employment it provides, for raising the average standard of living and for adding to the County's tax base. Thus, there is reason to feel optimistic about what the growth in housing means for quality of life in the area.

However, there are some disturbing side effects. Perhaps the most significant of these is the trend for housing prices to rise much faster than wages and salaries. Bonner County ranks 28th among Idaho counties in median income. It ranks 4th in the cost of housing. Twenty-two percent of Bonner county residents are renters for whom buying a home is not feasible. Although jobs are plentiful, a worker must earn \$11.20 an hour in order to afford rent on a 2 bedroom apartment. Only half of local job openings pay that well with the result that many households are obliged to pay 50% of their income or more for rent. It takes 2.2 minimum wage jobs to afford rent. There is now at least a 2-year wait for the Idaho Housing vouchers that are the only way some of our low-income families are able to survive. Waiting lists for the few low-income housing units are discouragingly long, and the current federal administration is proposing further cuts in housing subsidies. While half a million dollar condos in our area are being sold before they are even finished, local agencies working with low-income residents report more working families facing homelessness, and many others one pay-check away. The County is experiencing difficulty in recruiting and retaining teachers, firefighters and law enforcement officers, because salaries are not sufficient to cover the cost of housing.

Unless something is done, the absence of affordable housing promises to be an increasingly greater problem. What can be done about it? It's up to us, obviously, to find our own solutions. It also helps to look at what other communities have done when facing similar challenges. In Hailey, ID, the school district, with some assistance from the city, has purchased land and is constructing affordable housing to attract teachers to the area. In Sun Valley, an ordinance has been passed requiring all developers to insure that 15% of the houses they build are affordable for working families. In 350 other localities around the country, Housing Trust Funds have been established by legislation or ordinance. These are distinct funds established by cities, counties and states that dedicate sources of public revenue to support affordable housing. This model is an innovative departure from the way dollars have historically been secured for affordable housing. Inclusionary housing, a concept that blends affordable and more costly living units in the same neighborhood, is being made mandatory in many other communities throughout the country, with good results. In another approach in Idaho and Montana, ten community based non-profit organizations

formed the Northwest Rural Collaborative to increase their bargaining power, and to share expertise. Together, these ten groups produced 43 new rental units and 64 new homes in 2002 and 2003, with another 193 homes and 213 rental units in development. The Center for Community Change reports that non-profit housing developers are the primary source for the new construction of housing for low-income families.

Whether one or another of these solutions, modifications of them, or something drastically different is called for in Bonner County remains an open question. The choice facing us is whether to continue virtually to ignore the absence of affordable housing and suffer the consequences or find a way to address it so that our quality of life will not be compromised. Growth may be inevitable, but the way it shapes our community is up to us.

### **3. Access to Health Care**

**by Lora Cartelli**

A crucial indicator of Bonner County's quality of life is the extent to which its citizens have access to adequate health care. At first glance, the County would appear to score high in this respect. The County has an ample supply of well qualified health professionals. It has a highly rated hospital and a number of

well-managed care facilities for senior citizens. In addition, it has the health services provided by the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare and the Panhandle Health District as well as by a number of private agencies such as Hospice, the Alzheimer's Support Group and Community Action Partnership and Alternative Community Enrichment Services. These, however, are all measures of availability, not access. On this latter score, the County does considerably less well. A large number of its citizens – estimated at 13,000 adults – do not have health insurance and ready access to basic health care. This is not because these people are not working. At least 10,000 of the uninsured have jobs. The income these jobs provide is simply not adequate to afford insurance.

The consequences of not having health care coverage are disturbing and should concern us all. Studies have shown that compared to children with insurance, uninsured children are (1) just 1/6 as likely to have a usual site of health care, (2) more than five times as likely to have an unmet medical need each year; (3) more than three times as likely to not get a needed prescription drug, and (4) at least 70% more likely to go without care for common childhood illnesses such as asthma, ear infection, and sore throats. The effects on adults are also alarming. Failing to get adequate health care, a problem in its own right, produces multiple other problems, such as job loss and emotional instability. Access to appropriate health care should be everyone's privilege, regardless of ability to pay. For years, our county offered virtually no safety-net for the uninsured. They had basically three choices: the emergency room at the hospital, the county medical indigency program (available, however, only when chronic illnesses become catastrophic), or qualifying for Medicaid (possible for children but very, very difficult for adults). These alternatives are costly, only marginally effective, and far from affording adequate preventive or wellness care.

Recently, the tide has turned and county residents without insurance have been enabled to access some basic health care. This has happened through the collaborative effort of a truly incredible network of doctors, nurses, and clerically proficient volunteers, free clinic space made available by the Panhandle Health District, the collaboration of Bonner General Hospital in providing discounted x-rays and laboratory tests, Sandpoint Super Drug in supplying low-cost medication, and generous contributions from UNICEP, the Community Assistance League, Senior Thrift store, Avista, the Board of Realtors, and other private donors. Started July 2003, the Bonner Partners in Care Clinic (BPICC) has already provided a medical home for over 500 individuals who pay according to ability. They receive preventative and

wellness care. They are seen by a primary care physician and registered nurse on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. The services provided include, when called for, laboratory tests, medication assistance, x-rays, and other screening procedures. Instruction in care management is routinely supplied on every patient visit.

So far, volunteer help alone, as truly great as its been, has been insufficient to maintain the BPICC. A generous grant from a private foundation is filling the gap until the clinic can find the resources to operate wholly on its own. On its own means community support not only from volunteers but in the form of substantial financial contributions. Until universal health insurance is the norm for our society, communities will be faced with the task of filling the gap. BPICC is a step in that direction and one in which all of us in the County can take pride. For that pride to be warranted, however, the time must come when organizations such as BPICC become as much essential in our community as are, for example, our police and fire departments. For further information about becoming a clinic volunteer (medical or clerical) and/or to make a donation, please call 255-9099.

At the beginning of 2006 the local Democratic party sponsored two non-partisan forums on health care in the county. As a result of these non-partisan forums, a Health Initiative Task Force was formed and meets monthly.

In April 2006, Vondi Woodbury, from Muskegon Michigan presented information on a program there called Access Health to a local audience of government officials, medical providers and business people. The Access Health program seems to be a good model for Bonner County to begin to forge its own solution to health care access. U.S. Representatives Butch Otter and Mike Simpson are co-sponsoring a bill that would provide funding for such a project.

It's probably too early to predict the long term staying power of these efforts. Among quality of life issues facing the County, however, health care is one that is being seriously attended to.

## **4. Culture, Recreation & Entertainment**

**by Gretchen Hellar**

Adequate housing, quality education, available and accessible health care, and jobs that pay a living wage are obvious requirements of a life of quality. Access to cultural, recreational, and social amenities, while less likely to be thought of in this connection, are also important to making our lives more meaningful, joyful, and emotionally healthy.

Bonner County can be proud of an abundance of such amenities: our libraries, our hiking and biking trails, the Panida Theater, the Festival at



Sandpoint, the Pend Oreille Arts Council, various sports organizations, the Pend Oreille Orchestra and Chorale, the North Idaho Chorale, literary presentations by Lost Horse Press, and various poetry reading groups to name just a few. How many communities of our size can boast global cinema offerings, ballet, opera, chorales with an orchestra, an independent small press that has published award winning books, and numerous well known visual artists, musicians, and writers? Each event affords opportunities for us to enrich our lives socially, too.

There is, however, one glaring problem. Events are not available to all that might benefit from them. We have in mind especially the young, the aged, the disabled and those who think they can't afford to participate.

Organizations such as the Pend Oreille Arts Council (POAC) sponsor free art exhibitions, free summer concerts, and numerous other programs at no cost. Even though these events are free, one cannot assume they are accessible to all individuals such as those who are unable to drive, have no transportation, cannot afford childcare or who just are reticent to attend alone. POAC provides the opportunity to participate, but as a volunteer organization it cannot shoulder the additional responsibility of increasing accessibility. It is up to us. For example, group vans or even neighbors driving neighbors could greatly reduce the social isolation many people experience. Churches, social clubs, and other community organizations could sponsor group outings for members that find it difficult to attend on their own.

Some cultural events are not free and often the cost of a ticket is beyond the means of many folks. Productions at the Panida and the Festival at Sandpoint are not only important aspects of our cultural life but also a major venue of social interaction. Some communities underwrite a certain percentage of seats at community cultural events. Churches and other groups could provide complementary tickets or participation fees. Systems can be set up to distribute previously purchased tickets that will not be used. There are many innovative ways to address the financial barrier.

Our area is known for its recreational opportunities including Little League, soccer teams, and other group sports. But what of the child whose family cannot afford the equipment needed? A youth who loves soccer but cannot afford soccer shoes faces an insurmountable barrier. Parent groups, churches, and other community groups who recognize the important contribution sports makes to child development could organize equipment exchanges or some other way of ensuring that the "ability to pay" does not affect the "ability to play".

The vast resources at our library are free and available. Our library has a very effective bookmobile program, but even this program does not ensure maximum accessibility. If some one is unable to drive or is homebound these resources are not available to them. Some libraries have established “books by mail” for the homebound. Other ideas include home delivered “books on wheels” or scheduling regular Bookmobile stops at the senior center. Or perhaps library patrons could offer to pick up a book for a neighbor. The library is doing its part by providing a wide range of books and audiovisual resources. We can assist by making them more accessible to the wider community.

While overcoming accessibility barriers is beyond the scope and the financial ability of many of the above organizations, it is not beyond the ability of the community as a whole. It merely depends on our commitment to ensuring that everyone has the ability to enjoy the cultural and social resources of our community. As a community and as individuals, it is our choice and our responsibility.

## **5. Aging**

**by Charles Glock**

The proportion of Bonner County residents 65 years of age and older has grown rapidly over the last decades, and it is predicted to grow more rapidly than in the nation as a whole. Roughly 13 per cent of us were 65 or over in 2000. By as early as the year 2020, the figure is expected to almost double to 23.5%. That’s more than 14,000 people. Old age is accompanied by difficulties that younger persons are less likely to experience. The loss of a spouse is one of these. The older one gets, the more likely one is to find himself a widower or herself a widow. In the United States as a whole, 23 per cent of men over the

age of 75 as compared to 50 per cent of women live alone. Perhaps the major deprivation suffered by older people is a deterioration in their health. More than 50 per cent of the older population in Bonner County suffer from heart disease, hypertension, cancer, diabetes, or another chronic condition. Somewhat fewer, but still substantial minorities, have trouble hearing, seeing or no longer have any natural teeth. Mental health is also subject to decline.

Compounding these problems, of course, is finding the wherewithal to pay for their treatment. Medicare and Medicaid provide only a partial solution. When things get really tough, supplemental insurance is a requirement. Americans take pride in taking care of themselves, a dictum that most older people aim to follow. In this regard, the Area Agency on Aging cites many instances where older people have refused help because they want to manage on their own. Of course, when one has limited resources, is alone, and is ill or disabled or suffering dementia, doing it alone is not an option. Outside help is a necessity.

Bonner County houses a wide number of agencies whose purpose is or includes servicing the elderly. Among these are the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, the Panhandle Health District, the Bonner General Hospital, the Area Agency on Aging, Idaho Housing and Energy Assistance, Bonner Partners in Care, Senior Centers in Sandpoint and Priest River and the Clark Fork-Hope Area senior services. In addition to such agencies, the churches and service clubs of the area also are important County resources affording help. The services provided are all geared to enable older persons to achieve their maximum level of health, safety, and independence. Services are sometimes in-home, for example, delivered meals, assistance with bathing, light housekeeping, meal planning and preparation, and laundry. Sometimes, they are community-based, for example, congregate meals, medical and legal aids, nursing homes and assisted living, and transportation.

For all the help that is being provided, the common complaint of all of the agencies serving older people in Bonner County is that the supply of services seems always to fall short of the demand. Agencies are far from being able to meet daily needs for food, shelter, companionship, transportation and financial aid. What can be done? Perhaps the easiest way to help is to make a financial contribution to support the work of one or more of the servicing agencies. Another way to be of assistance is to volunteer time to work with an agency. Most of them depend in smaller or larger part on volunteers to help them accomplish their mission. If you are a church member or belong to a service

club, take a look to see what is being done now to help older citizens in your membership and outside it. Where you find that more might be accomplished -- for example, in providing transportation, in reducing the loneliness that so many older people experience, in making them feel useful by providing them things to do -- take the initiative to see that such things are done. Finally, raise your level of consciousness about the quality of life not only of the senior citizens of our community but of all of us. Once you've done that, well, we think anyway, that great things can happen. Hopefully, you will find this article and the series of which it is a part a step in this direction.

## **6. Voluntarism**

**by James L. Payne and Nancy Gerth**

Many gaps in the quality of life in Bonner County are filled by organizations relying on volunteers and voluntary donations. The latest "Directory of Voluntary Organizations in the Sandpoint Area" shows 142 groups, with an estimated membership of over 21,000, and total spending of \$12,000,000. The scope of these groups is impressive. There are 25 philanthropies that raise funds to help local causes, like the Rotary, the Community Assistance League, and Angels over Sandpoint. There are 29 churches which give money for local

needs, 18 groups for hobbies and recreation, and 10 self-improvement groups for purposes from weight loss to television awareness. There are groups in the arts from the Festival to POAC, and groups for youth activities, sports, and education. Together, these organizations play a vital role enriching life in our community.

Voluntary groups rely for their good works on fellow feeling and generosity. No one forces you to help. You choose which services you want to support and how to support them: with money, time or donated goods. If you don't want to help in the Long Bridge Swim, you don't have to. If you don't want to contribute to the Boy Scouts, no one forces you to.

What's keeping this noble, neighborly system from playing a larger role? Groups obviously need more funds and they need more committed leaders. Many of us volunteer for an hour or two, but few are willing to make the larger commitment necessary to manage such volunteer activities as drafting brochures, putting together budgets, and making the hundreds of organizing contacts that get the foot-soldier volunteers involved.

Another obstacle: many look to far-off authorities to solve problems. Are children overweight? It is the fault of the media and corporate greed, not the lack of community and family commitment to healthy diets. Who should take care of people who are flooded out of their homes? The federal government. Practically every human undertaking, from scientific research to opera, is expected to be funded by a distant entity.

Another factor undermining the voluntary sector today is . . . the involuntary sector. Taxation drains away funds we would like to donate to volunteer groups (even the publisher of the "Directory of Voluntary Organizations" had to pay \$30.70 in state sales taxes). Government regulations hamper innovative groups, its paperwork requirements drain their treasuries, and its liability litigation system frightens them from doing creative and helpful things.

The role that government should have in our lives is debatable. Some believe that we need government to build roads and fight wars. Many go so far as to advocate a government which provides universal health care. Others think that the less government the better. Now is a good time to debate which of our social needs are best met by volunteerism and which by government.

We have yet to tap the deep resources of voluntarism. It is an unknown ideal. To strengthen this sector what we need most of all is to understand it. We need

to study and discuss what the world would look like where community problems are addressed through voluntary means instead of an expensive bureaucracy. We need to address hurdles: are people really too selfish to volunteer? Do they have the time? What incentives do they need? Perhaps we could create a vibrant voluntary sector if we believed in it, if we taught our children not to look to far-off authorities to address problems in society. Instead, we could show them the new world they can build themselves by getting together in a friendly and tolerant way with their neighbors!

## **7. Caring for the Natural Environment**

**by Phil Hough**

In northern Idaho, we are blessed with an abundance of natural beauty. From magnificent mountains to pristine lakes, beautiful views abound and natural beauty surrounds us. In fact, whether we are natives or newcomers, our personal connection to the wild and scenic qualities of our area is the reason that most of us live here. For those who grew up in this rugged and rewarding landscape, roots are set deep and we find it hard to leave. Many others fell in love with the

area after their first trip across the long bridge and simply never left. Our common connection to this special landscape binds us together as a community.

Our public lands provide diverse and unparalleled recreational opportunities. And, these wildlands are one of our key economic drivers. They bring tourists, and they are the reason people are moving here. Vacation and second home buyers, retirees, and those who telecommute are arriving in increasing numbers. They bring with them personal income. This, in turn, creates jobs in finance, health care, education and retail as well as construction. Our public lands provide the landscape and recreational opportunities that fuels this economic gain. Yet, this same growth threatens our area's natural beauty and resources.

Unmanaged growth threatens our scenery and our enjoyment of the outdoors, impacting our quality of life. From new and larger businesses to the sprawl of housing and an expansion of infrastructure, we will find widened and re-aligned highways and growing water as well as sewage needs. The resulting fragmentation of open space, of habitat for plants and animals, reduces our north Idaho experience. Invasive species threaten our lands and lakes. Private property rights as well as public needs will have to be addressed. Combating the threat of fire and disease must be balanced with the impacts of proposed treatments. Land management decisions will need to look at all uses and all values including the impact on our environment. This will involve our communities and our local governments as well as our state and federal agencies.

As citizens, it is up to us to give input and direction to those elected and appointed officials who control growth, manage our public lands and waterways and who implement programs or projects. Many of us may be moved to join one or more of the many organizations that advocate for conservation. Others may choose to take individual action.

Conservation does not have to be combative. When you remove the "large E" or the misleading modifier of "radical", the term "environmentalist" likely applies to almost all of us. We all care about our own land and our natural environment, about clean air, the purity of our drinking water and our opportunities to experience the wonder of the great outdoors in whatever manner we choose. Whether we hunt, or photograph or sit and silently watch, who has not been moved by the sight of a magnificent moose? We hike, hunt, fish, paddle or sail a boat, motor across the lake, bicycle in town or in the mountains, use ATV's, snowmobile, cross country ski or hit the slopes at Schweitzer. We may simply drive our car, or walk down main street in awe at the mountains

peeking up from behind the buildings. We all find personal rejuvenation from connecting with the natural world of North Idaho. When we replace conflict with collaboration, when we seek solutions to common problems, we can make a difference in our quality of life and in our environment.

We have plenty of opportunities as citizens to advocate for protecting and preserving our natural places. We can learn more by attending educational forums sponsored by civic groups and public agencies. We can turn knowledge into action by attending, and speaking up, at a variety of public forums – city council meetings, planning and zoning meetings, county commissioner hearings, town hall meetings, forest planning meetings etc.

On a personal level we can landscape using native plants and materials, use organic fertilizers, reduce our use of phosphates and other harsh cleaning chemicals, find a careful and sustainable approach to timber management on private and public lands and utilize conservation easements. We can recycle and conserve the resources we use, shop for locally produced food items. We can carpool or get out and walk. We live, after all, in a “walking town”.

Most important of all we can get outside each day, enjoy the beauty and remind ourselves why we choose to live here in north Idaho.

## **8. Food Security**

**by Alice Wallace**

An indicator of a community’s quality of life about which we would all agree is the proportion of its citizens who are “food secure”. Being food secure means families being free of worry and concern about the amount and quality of their food supply. It would be nice to report that food security is not a problem in Bonner County. Unfortunately, this is not the case. That 35 per cent of our



school children qualify for the Free and Reduced Lunch program is evidence that there are many families who are experiencing difficulty in providing adequate nourishment for their children and indeed for themselves. For some families, as is attested to by the more than 300 families that turn every month to the Food Bank for help, it's literally a matter of not knowing where their next meal is coming from.

In Bonner County, we are concerned, obviously, about citizens who are desperate for a meal. Our support of the Food Bank demonstrates this as do the meal programs offered by the Senior Center, the Bonner Gospel Mission, and a number of the area's churches. St. Joseph's Catholic Church, for example, offers free meals on Friday nights. The Methodist Church does so on Thursday nights, the Assembly of God Church on Mondays from 4 to 6 p.m., and the Agape Café on Tuesdays at noon.

For the more persistent problems of food insecurity, our community relies primarily on government supported programs to do the job. There is the Free and Reduced Lunch program offered by the schools. There are also the Food Stamp and the Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) programs. Each is designed, in whole or part, to meet the ongoing problem of hunger.

All of these programs depend on our support. The government programs receive it through the taxes we, sometimes grudgingly, pay. The private ones rely on our generosity and determination that letting people go hungry is something we are unwilling to tolerate. That determination, unfortunately, sometimes fall short. Supporting the Food Bank, for example, is something we are prone to do on special occasions, most especially at Thanksgiving and Christmas. The same is true for the Bonner Gospel Mission and to some extent the food kitchens. The problems that all of these organizations face, however, are not seasonal, they're year round. Moreover, by virtue, in part, of population growth but also as a result of the growing gap between rich and poor, they appear to be growing. The Food Bank's distribution of more than 300,000 pounds of food this year exceeded any other year in its history.

We are unlikely to create in the near future a society where the problem of food insecurity becomes non-existent. In the interim, it behooves us to do the best we can to improve on what is being done now. With respect to government programs, they deserve our support but also our critical input to insure that they are adequate and performed in an accountable fashion. In the private realm, perhaps the major thing we can do is to insure that existing programs are

supported on a regular rather than only on a seasonal basis, and at a level so that the demands being placed on them can be adequately met.

Volunteering one's services is one way this can be done. The Food Bank, the Senior Citizens Center, the Bonner Gospel Mission, the faith supported food kitchens all rely on volunteers to carry on their missions. They would all welcome your asking if you can help. Here's another idea: many of us can afford an extra \$5 added on to our weekly (or monthly) food budgets especially if we forgo that unneeded and unhealthy bag of potato chips or pint of ice cream. Wouldn't it be great if each of us added to our shopping list some food that would be donated to the Food Bank or one of the other organizations involved in feeding the hungry? If we are not sure what type of food is needed, a cash donation is a good way of showing we are determined that no neighbor goes hungry.

As we sit down to dinner tonight let's remember that hunger is something that none of our neighbors should have to experience, nor will they if we just make the commitment to share a small bit of what we have.

## **9. Living Wages**

**by Brenda Hammond**

There is good news about employment in Bonner County. For one thing, the unemployment rate is down. 5.6 per cent at this time last year, it is now 4.6 per cent. This is the lowest level achieved in the last thirty years. The other good news is that the fields of employment that have added the most jobs in the last

two years have been in relatively higher--paying areas like manufacturing, finance and insurance, and professional, scientific and technical services. As a result, the average hourly wage in the County grew from \$14.75 in 2004 to \$15.65 in 2005. This compares to virtually no growth at all over the previous four years. The median wage in Bonner County is now \$12.15 an hour, meaning that half of workers make less than that, and the other half make more. One quarter of all workers make more than \$17.37 an hour, while one-quarter earn less than \$8.41.

Compared to the federally mandated minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour, these wages seem respectable. Before jumping to such a conclusion, however, one must look at what these wages will buy in terms of basic needs for individuals and families. Recently, the Northwest Job Gap Study, conducted by the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations, compared wages with the cost of a family meeting such basic needs as housing, food, transportation, and health and child care. Adjusting their figures for Bonner County, a single adult must make at least \$9.08/ hr and two adults, one working with 2 children, \$19.15/h to meet these needs. With Bonner County's median wage at \$12.15 an hour, and half of workers making less than that, wages no longer appear in such a positive light. The Northwest Study includes stories of families with some of the “good jobs,” families where both parents work, where one has a college degree – and finds these are families where “Groceries come last after all bills are paid. We rely on the food bank to make it through the month.”

A recent article on the increase of homelessness cites that, nationally, one quarter of the homeless population are people with full time jobs. What can be done to remedy this situation? Certainly, supporting local businesses and recruiting businesses that pay higher wages, and/or provide more worker benefits is one approach. Another would be providing additional training for unskilled workers to make them eligible for some of the higher paying jobs. One-ninth of the people in Idaho are employed in the tourism industry – one that pays some of the lowest wages. However, the answer is not to be found entirely in attracting new jobs to the area and in improving wages. The cost of the items those wages are expended upon needs also to be taken into consideration. For example, in order to leave enough income for other expenses, no one should pay more than 30% of their income for housing. Yet, many are forced to pay 50 per cent and even more.

It stands to reason, then, that if there were more affordable housing options available, wages might more often be adequate. On this score, some imaginative

thinking seems called for to bring housing costs down. Do houses really have to be as large as they average out now to be? Are there ways that communities might consider to reduce the costs of housing lots? Would greater concentration of housing be a possible way to go? A similar challenge relates to child care costs. In Bonner County, child care for just one school age child, half-time, is \$434 a month. Couldn't communities work together to provide quality child care at reduced cost? Are cooperatives the answer? Were such possibilities realized, working families would be enabled to use their earned dollars to cover other needs. So – although the employment news is positive, we must not be complacent and think that providing jobs alone guarantees a good quality of life. While working to attract better paying jobs, we must also be creative in finding ways to reduce costs especially in housing. Hopefully, employers who now contribute to the problems by paying less than a livable wage will join in the effort.

## **10. Voter Turnout and Partisanship**

**by Charles Glock**

What is the quality of our political participation in Bonner County with regard to voter turnout and party affiliation? Voter turnout can be measured in more than one way. The most popular measure, probably because it is the easiest to obtain, is the proportion of registered voters who vote. In the 2004

Presidential election, 72 per cent of all registered citizens in the United States voted. The figure for Idaho was 69.9 per cent. Bonner County did better; 78 per cent of those registered voted. We are more likely to vote in Presidential than non-Presidential elections. The average turnout, again of registered voters, between 1978 and 2004 was 75% for Presidential elections. It was 61 per cent for non-Presidential elections. All in all, average voter turnout has remained relatively steady. For example, in 1980, the turnout in the County for the Presidential elections was 77 per cent, in 2004 it was 78 per cent.

While we have some room for improvement, but there is a relatively healthy political climate in the County when it comes to national and state elections. When we turn to local elections, however, the picture that emerges is less sanguine. Here, the statistics available to us are for municipal elections in the City of Sandpoint. In Sandpoint, mayoral elections are held every four years, council elections every two years. The turn out of registered voters in the 2005 council election was 27.71 per cent. The figure for 2003, when both a mayor and council members were to be elected, was only slightly better, 32.91 per cent. (The figure for the 2001 council elections was an abysmal 5.05 per cent but this was an uncontested election). Over time, there has been a gradual decline in turn out in both kinds of elections. Since 1975, the high point for a mayoral election was 87.2% in 1983, the low point was 32.91 per cent in 2003. In contested council elections, the high point was 65.45 per cent in 1981 as contrasted with 27.71 per cent in 2005.

Before commenting on these figures, let's take a quick look at how partisan our political choices are. Taking account of our relative preference for Democratic and Republican Presidential candidates, the Republican candidate's share of the vote was 22.9% higher than the Democratic candidate's vote in 2004. In 2000, it was 27.8 percentage points higher. In 1996, the figure was plus 6.3 and in 1992 a minus 7.9. For U.S. Congressman, 1st district, the Republican vote was 27.4 percentage points higher than the Democratic vote in 2004. The equivalent figure for 2000 was 26.8; for 1996, minus 1; and for 1992, minus 25.5. Both sets of figures reveal a dramatic swing from Democratic to Republican camps.

What to make of these figures? Data on municipal elections are most disturbing, signifying a notable decline of involvement in local affairs, scarcely a sign of a vibrant democracy. What to do about it is beyond the scope of a brief essay, but it is clearly a topic for community concern and action. As to the increasing dominance of the Republican party in the County as well as the State,

opinions will differ on whether or not this constitutes a problem. This essayist would feel more comfortable with a more level playing field.

## **11. Prejudice and Discrimination**

**by Gretchen Hellar**

Only a few years ago people thought of North Idaho as a haven for Neo-Nazi white supremacists. This picture, presented by the media, was grossly exaggerated, but it was widely disseminated nevertheless. It was based

principally on the actions of a small group, the Aryan Nations, that felt the Northwest should be a white homeland and that was willing to engage in bombing and bank robbery to further that goal. The fascination of the mass media with the group's aberrations produced the distorted picture presented. It took concerted efforts over a period of years by churches, Chambers of Commerce, business leaders, schools, individual citizens, community groups and human rights organizations to deal effectively with the Aryan Nations and to eliminate the stigma that had become attached, however wrongly, to North Idaho.

North Idaho's confrontation of the Aryan Nations produced an abiding commitment to be continually vigilant about violations of human rights in the area. It led to the founding of the Task Force on Human Relations in Kootenai County and later, the Human Rights Task Force in Bonner County when the supremacist virus threatened to expand here. The recent establishment, in December 2005, of the Human Rights Education Institute in Coeur d'Alene also has its origins in the efforts given to combating the Aryan Nations. Through the work of these organizations and others, there seems to be no doubt of a heightened level of public awareness, concern, and engagement with human rights issues in North Idaho.

In Bonner County, this is manifest in, among other ways, ethnic programs presented by the Pend Oreille Arts Council in its performance series at the Panida Theatre, the proactive stance taken since 9-11 by churches and other groups to head off possible anti-Islamic discrimination and ill feeling, the emphasis on appreciating diversity in many school curricula, the presentation of public forums and programs on human rights issues by a number of local groups, and the efforts of organizations, such as PFLAG and CO-AD, to combat specific kinds of prejudice and discrimination. Students at Sandpoint High School overcame objections and formed a chapter of the Gay-Straight Alliance, with support of the principal and school board.

The community's concern for protecting human rights is also evident in the availability of a range of resources to help those who experience unlawful discrimination. In this regard, the Human Rights Task Force with its neighbor support program assists citizens who feel their rights may have been violated. The Community Action Partnership affords information and advice on renter's rights, housing rights, and economic protection. A number of local attorneys work pro bono in providing legal aid. The Idaho State Department of Health and Welfare provides child and adult protective services. Local law enforcement

includes public safety and protection among its charges and local schools all have programs designed to address problems of bullying and harassment.

Despite all of these efforts, there are members of our community who still suffer from discrimination and violation of their human and civil rights. Some of our public buildings are not handicap accessible, harassment and bullying in schools has not been entirely eliminated, law enforcement sometimes treats certain groups, teens, for example, and the poor, differently from the rest of the population. One still hears bigoted statements against homosexuals, minorities, and members of different religions, and the poor are often stigmatized as lazy or unmotivated. These are indications that we still have a way to go, but our community, perhaps more than other communities, has learned the consequences of ignoring human rights. Working together and remaining vigilant, we can make our community one in which every individual enjoys the basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled, including the rights to life and liberty, freedom of thought and expression, and equality before the law.

## **12. Transportation**

**by Aaron Knight**

When someone mentions transportation the first thing that comes to mind is streets, highways, bridges and automobiles. Thinking this way limits our choices. Transportation means moving individuals from point A to point B.



Solutions to our transportation challenges are easier to understand and solve if we consider our real transportation objectives: to improve accessibility to businesses and services, and to enhance commerce, health and quality of life.

What transportation is now available in Bonner County? Federally funded through the State of Idaho, North Idaho Community Express (NICE) provides local curb-to-curb rides, with advance reservations, Monday thru Friday in Sandpoint and its environs, and inter-city services between Sandpoint and Coeur d'Alene connecting with Greyhound Bus to other locations. NICE vehicles are wheelchair accessible; fares are reasonable (donation only for Seniors).

On the private side, Bonner Cab affords a 24-hour taxi service with rates starting at \$5.50 (\$4.00 for Seniors) in Sandpoint. On 24 hour advance notice, Bonner Cab will provide service elsewhere in the County and beyond, including Spokane. White Tail Transportation has handicapped accessible vehicles by reservation only. Schweitzer runs buses to and from the mountain from the bottom of the hill. Amtrak stops in Sandpoint twice daily. School buses serve the transportation needs of children as do, of course, mom and dad.

These transportation services, while all desirable and important, do not provide the level of service needed given the demographics and population size of Bonner County. They miss people who cannot afford them. Their availability to citizens living at a distance from Sandpoint and in rural areas is severely limited. Mom and dad, especially when both are working, are not always able to take their children when and where they either need to or want to go. If they don't have a vehicle, they are never able to do so. School buses are not entirely the answer since they are geared to serve the transportation needs of groups of children, not the individual child.

Being the kind of community Bonner County is, there are many volunteers who are engaged in trying to fill the gap in meeting the needs of the transportation-dependent. When made aware of the need, such volunteers will go out of their way to drive someone to a doctor's appointment or the grocery store. For the most part, such volunteering is done on an individual basis. Some churches, however, have tried to organize congregational members to more concerted action. Since last year, under the direction of its Chair, Dan Young, the Health and Elder Care Committee of Sandpoint's Chamber of Commerce has been recruiting volunteer drivers to provide transportation to seniors in need who call 290-2249 anytime during the day or night.

Such services alleviate the County's transportation problems, but they far from solving them. And, if the number at or near the poverty level continues to increase and the County's population grows as expected, the problems can be expected to do nothing but intensify. The solution, albeit one not easily achieved, is a well funded and planned public transportation system with fixed routes, curb-to-curb services, Park 'n' Ride lots and shuttle services to businesses, health facilities, recreational areas, tourist destinations and schools. Such a system would meet the needs of the transportation deprived, reduce reliance on the automobile as the primary means of transportation, require fewer parking spaces and less road maintenance, lessen road usage, and, among other things, increase disposable income by saving money on a second car, fuel, insurance and maintenance and repair costs. Well planned public transportation is a solution that the country will eventually be forced to embrace. Given all the potential advantages, there is good reason to start now. Other communities in the nation are doing it. Bonner County should also be so engaged.

### **13. Education**

**by Nancy Gerth**

Ask a woman who went to school for 21 years to write an article about education and you'll get a song of praise. My education gave me freedom: to live where I wanted, work where I wanted, marry whom I wanted, support myself and generally be my own boss. My education allowed me to define quality of life for myself, and pursue it as I chose. If I had to thank my parents for one thing above all, it would be my education. I consider myself lucky. And I think I owe it to the next generation to provide for them what was provided for me (even though I never had children myself). So I vote for school levies, even when I disagree with how some of the money is spent. I support government and private education initiatives.

In a recent opinion piece in USA Today economists Stephen J. Dubner and Steven D. Levitt offer convincing evidence that “children of successful, well-educated parents have a built-in advantage over the children of struggling, poorly educated parents. Call it a privilege gap. The child of a young, single mother with limited education and income will typically test about 25 percentile points lower than the child of two married, high-earning parents.”

In short, improving quality of life and improving education are inextricably intertwined.

Education underlies every aspect of our quality of life. At least in the 20th century, more education was correlated with better quality of life measured in terms of income level, housing, health, job satisfaction and community participation. And achieving a quality education is based on all the other facets of quality of life. For example, living wages, adequate food and access to health care starting in the womb affect education. Among other things, says Idaho Kids Count, “poor school performance in adolescence may reflect inadequate nutrition associated with low birth weight.” (Growing Up Poor in Idaho, [www.idahokidscount.org](http://www.idahokidscount.org).)

In Bonner County more of our children are graduating from high school than ever before. And, according to ISAT scores, education in the Lake Pend Oreille school district has been steadily improving. The percentage of students ranked proficient is shown in the following table\*:

Year	Reading	Math	Lang. Usage
04/05	80.4	75.1	n.a.

03/04	77.93	72.82	75.45
02/03	72.44	66.03	73.13

Early head start, WIC, Head Start, school food programs, and tutoring programs currently support the academic programs in our schools. But there also appear to be gaps such as "life long" learning programs and nutritional programs when WIC no longer applies. Many students face financial and/or transportation barriers to participation in extra curricular activities often associated with educational performance.

How can we improve our children's education if the outcome is already predetermined by the relative advantages their parents enjoy? Well, we could educate the parents through the life long learning center at the library. We could offer nutritious food at our schools and ban junk food. We could encourage our children to exercise, by, for instance, suggesting that they to walk to school in good weather. We could help the single mother stop struggling, by looking at living wage and affordable housing issues. We could address the health problems of our uninsured. We could do things to make the arts and leisure activities more accessible. And we can make sure the next generation is more educated than ours.

\*Thanks to Doug Olin of Lake Pend Oreille School District for providing data for this essay.

## **14. Conclusions**

**by Charles Glock**

These essays have afforded an assessment of the County's strengths and weaknesses in housing, health care, arts and recreation, aging, volunteering, the environment, food security, employment, political participation, human rights, transportation, and education. Our goal was to stimulate discussion and action so that our strengths might be built upon and our weaknesses more effectively addressed. In this last essay, we summarize what we have learned from our endeavors and consider where we might go from here.

There are good things to be said about the state of the County. We are in the midst of a housing boom, our health facilities are on the whole first rate, nobody appears to be going without food, we score high in the arts and in providing extensive recreational facilities, our population is living longer, employment is up and on the average, with higher paying jobs, we are environmentally in relatively good shape, our human rights record is solid, and our schools, given limited resources, are improving. On the negative side, the principal problems that our survey has identified are these.

---While no one is going hungry, thanks to the Food Bank and a number of food kitchens, a substantial minority, perhaps as many as a third, are not food secure; getting enough nourishing food on the table is something that they have to contend with constantly.

---There is a growing shortage of affordable housing. More and more of our citizens with low or even moderate incomes are unable to afford a place to live. Housing costs far outweigh increases in wages.

---An increasing shortage of affordable day care constitutes a problem, especially for single parent households.

--- Despite some recent advances in providing health care to those without insurance, more than a quarter of Bonner County residents are uninsured, unprepared for any major illness, and unable to pay for preventive care.

---The older population is growing more rapidly than the availability of support services. Agencies are unable to meet the need for food, shelter, companionship, transportation, and financial aid.

We hope that the essays have the effect of raising community consciousness about quality of life problems in the County, and lead readers to contemplate how they might contribute, alone and in cooperation with others, to address them. To further these possibilities, churches, civic groups and businesses are

encouraged to make the series of essays the focus for reading and discussion groups. If you have use for additional copies, they can be obtained at the Sandpoint library, by calling 283-7149 or by sending an e-mail to chyogl@yahoo.com .

We recognize, of course, that much more must be done to engage the community in efforts to raise quality of life. In that regard, we call to your attention to the following projects whose purposes are to do just that.

--- The Community Action Partnership is working to assure that all Bonner County citizens have sufficient money, relationships, and meaning in their lives to thrive. A new initiative crossing class and cultural lines to end poverty, called CIRCLES, is just getting off the ground. For more information and to learn how you may participate in this effort to combat poverty, call Shirley Paulison at 255-2910.

--- The Bonner County Human Relations Task Force is tackling the problem of affordable housing. If you are interested in getting involved, call Gretchen Hellar at 263-6893.

---A Health Task Force, with members including government, business and health providers is meeting once a month. For more information, contact Nancy Gerth at 946-4140 (local) or e-mail her at docnangee@yahoo.com.

--- The Sandpoint based Kinnikinnick Chapter of the Idaho Native Plant Society is engaged in conservation efforts for native plants and native plant habitat. Interested in helping? Call Phil Hough at 255-2780.

If there are others who would like to be involved in addressing any of the problems that have been identified in the series, e-mail Brenda Hammond at B.Hammond@acomunityaction partnership.com or call her at 263-7149. It is our hope that this series of essays will mark the beginning of many efforts to develop active plans throughout our community to improve the quality of life for all.

### **About the Authors**

Lora Cartelli is health care advocate for insured and uninsured citizens in our community.

Nancy Gerth has worked as a grant writer for schools and volunteer organizations in our area since 1992. She is currently the director of the Health Task Force.

Charles Glock is a retired professor of sociology who has written extensively on quality of life issues.

Brenda Hammond works at Community Action Partnership as a Family Development Specialist and at ACES as case manager and psycho-social rehabilitation provider for clients with chronic mental illness.

Gretchen Hellar is a local human rights activist who moonlights as a political activist.

Phil Hough is a volunteer, advocating for conservation and education in bringing a thoughtful, balanced approach to community challenges. He is Chair of Friends of Scotchman Peaks Wilderness.

Aaron Knight is one of the founders of N.I.C.E. (North Idaho Community Express) and is currently owner of White Tail Transportation.

Jim Payne has taught political science at Yale and Johns Hopkins. His books include "Overcoming Welfare" (1998) and "A History of Force" (2004).

Alice Wallace is Director of the Bonner County Food Bank.