

**Guest Editorial for *The Daily Record*
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As CWU Grows, We Should Count Our Blessings
By Debbie Strand

As the new year begins, many of us have the economy and the economic well-being of our community on our minds. Recently much of the economic news has been, to say the least, depressing. The state budget is facing a tremendous shortfall with expenses outpacing revenues by a significant figure. Unemployment rates throughout most of the state are climbing and Washington state unemployment is among the highest in the United States. Unemployment benefits for many are expiring. It seems as though almost daily we hear news of another company that is laying off employees or facing bankruptcy. The Governor's Tax Study Commission says our tax structure is making things worse; some are considering a state income tax. According to most economic analysts, the recovery will be slow with Washington state lagging behind the rest of the nation.

Certainly Kittitas County has faced its share of difficulties during the recent recession but we have been somewhat insulated. Several factors contribute, but much of the insulation is due to the presence of Central Washington University in our community. I like to use the analogy that CWU is to Kittitas County what Boeing is to the Puget Sound area. (I'm old enough to remember the Seattle billboard during the big Boeing layoffs in the '70s asking the last person to leave Seattle to turn off the lights.) With almost 1,400 employees and a payroll of over \$6 million in October 2002, CWU is by far the largest employer in the county. The jobs associated with the university are traditionally stable, providing good wages and benefits. We all benefit as the salaries paid to individuals flow back into our community in the form of the purchase of goods and services, and taxes paid. But Central Washington University benefits the entire Kittitas County community in many other ways as well.

Quality of life issues are important factors in business location decisions and a tool for recruiting or retaining a business. If you live in Kittitas County, you benefit from the cultural, social and sporting activities at the university. We enjoy plays, musical performances, and art exhibits. Last fall the Wildcats treated us all to a championship football season. Lecture series and continuing education classes provide us with the opportunity for continual learning and broadening of our knowledge base. Local businesses reap the benefit of not only additional consumers of their products and services, but educated employees, too.

CWU is also the home of The Washington State Archives Central Regional Branch serving Benton, Chelan, Douglas, Franklin, Grant, Kittitas, Klickitat, Okanogan, and Yakima counties. This entity preserves and provides public access to historical public records produced by government entities in these counties. The Chimpanzee and Human Communication Institute "Chimposium" helps us understand how humans acquire language skills and how new research may help improve the lives of children with communication disorders. During the school year, almost any day of the week provides some activity that local residents can enjoy. And throughout the year, the Conference Center hosts many conferences that bring attendees into our

community. The bottom line? CWU draws new people -- and their business -- who otherwise *would not come* to our hotels, restaurants and other businesses from around the state. And it makes a positive difference for us all.

An institution as big and as busy as CWU also brings change to our community -- and change is never something that's easy to accommodate. The good news is that change on the campus of CWU pumps millions of dollars into the Kittitas County economy. CWU is now in construction Phase One of the new music educational facility, with Phase Two to follow, pending legislative budget approval. The renovation of Kamola Hall, currently underway, is expected to be completed early this summer. CWU is considering a new SUB/REC building -- its first non-academic building on the campus in 30 years! To accommodate this growth and future growth on campus, power transmission lines will need to be moved.

All of these projects will create changes in our community. As new, modern facilities are added to the campus more students are attracted to CWU, which in turn creates more jobs and brings additional revenues to our community. CWU benefits us all by keeping our local economy healthy -- and that's an advantage most communities in the state would give anything to have. As the year 2003 begins, we all should take a minute to consider what our community would be like without the presence of Central Washington University, and decide what each of us can do to support our valued neighbor. I for one feel blessed to have this economic engine in the Kittitas Valley.

Debbie Strand is Executive Director of The Phoenix Economic Development Group, a private, non-profit organization whose mission is to provide leadership that stimulates business and promotes economic opportunities to support the needs of Kittitas County.