Website allows citizens to monitor commonwealth

Virginians have another avenue of providing input on how the commonwealth does business. The “Virginia Performs” website (www.Vaperforms.virginia.gov) allows citizens to review performance targets for state agencies and institutions and to monitor how different regions are faring. The site focuses on seven key areas: economy, education, health and family, public safety, natural resources, government and citizens, and transportation. Each area allows for input on approximately 50 societal indicators, ranging from third-grade reading scores to cancer incidence, to answer the overall question, “How is Virginia doing?” Additionally, users can compare Virginia to neighboring states, get a detailed demographic profile of the state’s regions or localities, and create custom reports on dozens of measures at the local or regional level.

Energy Resource Guide provides valuable information for Virginians

A new Web-based project from Virginia Cooperative Extension gives tips on creating energy-efficient homes, implementing cost-saving energy management practices for businesses, finding renewable energy resources, and more. The Energy Resource Guide (www.energyguide.ext.vt.edu) is geared toward a wide audience, including consumers, farmers, and businesses. An additional benefit of the guide is that it will help Virginia’s teachers and students. The commonwealth’s Standards of Learning require middle school students to understand energy concepts, and the guide was specifically designed to provide curriculum suggestions, practical learning activities, online workbooks on alternative fuels, and ideas for science projects.

New tuition incentives help curb college costs

Although tuition and mandatory fees for in-state undergraduates at Virginia’s public colleges and universities rose by an average of 6.8 percent—or $452—for 2007-08, that increase is less than it could have been because of the state’s new tuition incentive program. Last year, in contrast, the average increase was 9.3 percent, or $567.

Under the program’s guidelines, colleges and universities qualify for additional state money if they cap increases in tuition and fees at 6 percent. All of Virginia’s eligible higher education institutions met this condition and will receive the approximately $7.2 million allocated by the 2007 General Assembly for the Higher Education Tuition Incentive Fund.

Testing public readiness for disaster

In spite of terror attacks around the world and the fallout from Hurricane Katrina, most Americans remain unprepared for a disaster. To help make disaster preparedness a more public issue, the non-profit Council for Excellence in Government created a Public Readiness Index that tests how much people know how to plan for a natural disaster or a terrorist attack. The questions ask people about their community’s disaster plan, whether they know how to find emergency broadcasting channels on the radio, and if they’ve planned a home disaster kit. A report released by the council in late 2006 found that, on a scale of one-to-10, the average score was 3.31. The index was converted into an online Readiness Quotient (RQ) Test so that communities can score their own preparedness. The test can be found at www.whatsyourrq.org, which also offers “Tips and Tools to Raise Your RQ.”

Virginia tops list for children’s chance to succeed

According to a report released in Education Week magazine in January, Virginia tops all the states in providing a child with the best chance to succeed in life. The results stem from an index created by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center and are based on 13 educational and economic indicators, including household income and percentage of adults with postsecondary degrees. Rounding out the top five states were Connecticut, Minnesota, New Jersey, and Maryland, respectively.

Rankings were based on how each state performed in a category compared to the national average. In the category of steady employment, for example, Virginia ranked first with 72.2 percent of its adult labor force working full-time—the national average is 67.2 percent. The only category in which the commonwealth did not surpass the national average was the percent of children enrolled in preschool and kindergarten in 2005. The data for the rankings comes from the Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Education.

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