

# Environmental Scan/SWOT Analysis

SWOT is shorthand for an assessment of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) that a given organization is facing. Strengths are things that your organization does particularly well, or things that distinguishes your community from others. Strengths might include your geographic location, the quality of life in your community, the motivation of your staff, the support of the community, the professional quality of the organization, etc. In short, strengths are those factors that make the organization a desirable place to work and the community a desirable place to live.

*Weaknesses* are the opposite of strengths. They are qualities or conditions that need improvement. These may include people, resources, systems, and procedures. They may also include qualities and conditions that can't be improved in the short-run, like being located next to hazard waste site or having a freeway that divides the city into two different socio-economic neighborhoods.

*Opportunities* are temporary conditions that create a chance for something positive to happen, but which requires "seizing the moment". Windows of opportunity usually arise from situations outside your organization, and require an eye to what might happen in the future. Opportunities may be created by shifts in community demographics, changes in the business community, partnering opportunities with other jurisdictions and nonprofit organizations and shifts in federal and state legal and funding requirements. Opportunities need not be "game changers". They may be small things such as getting started on a necklace bike trail or watershed restoration project.

*Threats* are the opposite of opportunities. They are changes on the horizon that can negatively affect your organization from the outside. For example, the rising costs of pension funds, Covid-like pandemics that adversely impact expense and revenue streams, large-scale retirements, and deteriorating infrastructure pose different kinds of threats to the organization and the community. Local governing bodies can't control these kinds of threat; they can only mitigate them, usually in partnership with other governing entities and community partners (see Collaboration and Community Leadership).

The four-part analysis that SWOT uses to scan the environment has proven to be an effective tool in helping boards gather the information they need to address a wide variety of issues that emanate from the single question that is the focus of SWOT: Are we doing the right thing? Periodically, boards need to take time out to consider this question from a 360-degree perspective. In doing so, boards acquire increased confidence in deciding how to re-position the organization strategically to provide high qualities of services for the next generation of citizens, not simply those currently being served.