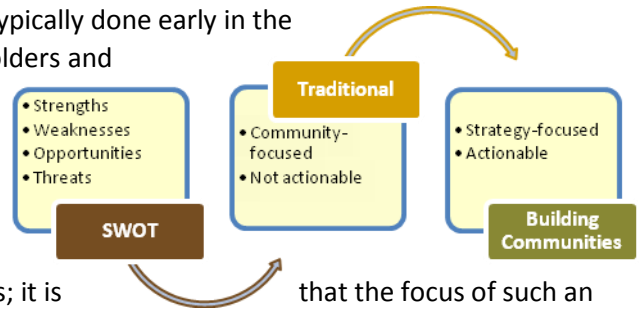




A Better Process Focusing SWOT, Research, and Vision Statements

Three of the fundamental activities in a typical strategic planning process are conducting a Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats (SWOT) analysis, conducting research, and crafting vision statements. All too often, however, there is a substantial disconnect between these activities and the recommendations the plan ultimately yields.

A Better Use of SWOT. Using the SWOT analysis tool is typically done early in the process. The logic is that by convening a large group of stakeholders and using the tool, a broad overview of the most significant issues, trends, obstacles, and opportunities can be surfaced. Frequently, however, a long list of Ss, Ws, Os, and Ts becomes a blur, and the community ends up doing what it wants to anyway without a strategic application of the SWOT findings.



It is not that Building Communities does not do a SWOT analysis; it is that the focus of such an analysis is on the prospective 25 strategies, not the community as a whole. By focusing on the Ss, Ws, Os, and Ts of the individual strategies, *actionable* information is collected and the strategies are prioritized.



The Timing of Research. It is often assumed that a community strategic plan begins with a demographic analysis. Typically, such an analysis is chock full of numbers: total population, ethnicity, jobs trends, income statistics, economic sector analysis, housing facts, commuting patterns, and on and on. This demographic analysis can comprise much of the document. But why? Similar to how the generic community-wide SWOT analysis can become a blur, so can such statistics.

Building Communities respects the need for research, but recommends such analysis be done only after the direction has been set through the Strategy Selector tool. Successful implementation of virtually all of the 25 strategies requires specific planning. A Business Recruitment strategy may require some form of industry analysis. A Downtown Development strategy may require a retail leakage study. A Destination Tourism strategy may require a market analysis. With proper timing, each of these research efforts can yield very *actionable* information.

A Focused Vision. Chances are if you put 50 community advocates in a room with the assignment to craft a “community vision statement,” you will end up with something similar to the statement at right. 100 person-hours could be saved by copying and pasting a similar statement generated by a community 50 miles down the road. While such statements are uplifting, they generally add little value to the work at hand.

Alternatively, a vision statement based on a rigorous selection of strategies and reflective of the community’s unique assets and intended direction could be of substantial value in improving the local economy and quality of life.

If a community desires to craft a vision statement, Building Communities strongly recommends it be done late in the planning process—creating the *vision* only after a disciplined effort has been made to *focus* on real assets and a clearly defined direction.

