
IV. S.W.O.T. ANALYSIS

A. Strengths

1. People

The single most important strength of the San Luis Valley is its people. "Self-sufficient" "hearty" "cohesive" "able to scratch out a living" "can work together and get things done" --- all words described over and over about the people of "el Valle." In this region of challenging economic conditions and harsh winters, the tenacity, creativity, and relationships of the people stand out. These are the very qualities that will be needed to tackle new challenges and opportunities in the five years ahead.

2. Quality of Life

The San Luis Valley has a low population and is a nice place to live. While the economic indicators show high poverty rates, these numbers do not tell the story about quality of life as measured by time with family; safety; open vistas; not much pollution, crime, and traffic; easy access to the outdoors and solitude; and close-knit communities. These are things many people seek in retirement while most in the Valley have them right out their back door. "This is a quiet, safe place to raise kids," one person noted, "we want to keep it that way."

3. Collaboration

Although the Valley communities are diverse, a great deal of collaboration has occurred on water, E-911, and other commonly shared issues. "There are many tables for Valley-wide conversations" one CEDS participant noted, "probably more multi-county efforts than anywhere else in the State." The City of Alamosa is part of this equation, and is noted for its asset as a regional economic hub, and home to Adams State College and Trinidad State Junior College.

4. Agriculture

Agriculture is the historic heart of the Valley. The vast fields and pastoral landscapes are a highly-valued regional asset. Agriculture also provides jobs, and everyone agrees that strengthening this sector is vital.

5. Water

Water is the economic life-blood of the San Luis Valley. Without adequate water supplies, the agriculture sector would not survive --- nor would the communities. The San Luis Valley's unique underground aquifers and other water resources are its key assets, and deserve the utmost care, monitoring, stewardship, and protection.

6. Environment

The scenic beauty and natural surroundings of the San Luis Valley are truly remarkable, and are obvious economic

and community assets. Others include clean air and water; vast expanses of public lands and open spaces; river corridors; wildlife; bird sanctuaries; and the abundance of trails and roads to hunting, fishing, and recreation. These are qualities that certainly bring in tourists but the locals enjoy as well.

7. Affordable Housing

While Mineral and Rio Grande Counties are seeing increases in land and housing prices, most of the Valley is generally an affordable place to live. This is noted as a strength especially in terms of workforce development and recruitment of new business.

8. Cultural Heritage

You cannot visit the San Luis Valley without being aware of its rich Hispanic cultural heritage. This culture is present in some form or fashion, pretty much everywhere. The culture draws visitors to historic places, cultural sites, museums, art galleries, and other attractions.

9. Art and History

A growing number of artisans are moving in. They bring jobs and income, and attract outsiders who visit their galleries and shows. The many historic buildings and sites plus two scenic byways are considered regional treasures (and could become National Treasures with Historic Area designation).

10. Local Planning Initiatives

Several groups in the Valley are actively involved in economic planning, including CON-CEPTs in Conejos County; ScSEED in Saguache County; the Costilla County planning initiatives; Alamosa County Chamber Development Corporation (ACDC); and various Chambers of Commerce. By working on locally-targeted economic and community development projects, these groups are helping to improve the outlook of the region as a whole.

B. Weaknesses

1. Weak Economy

The challenging economic development climate in the San Luis Valley rivals the harsh winters. A "stagnant economy" "young people can't stay here" "too many people on welfare" "no job base" --- are phrases repeated in the CEDS process. In short, this is a hard place to make a living and it shows up in the indicators. "We want this to be a place our kids will want to live when they grow up," sums up the basic economic frustration expressed by many. A need to diversify the economy is probably at the root of this frustration.

2. Isolation

The isolation of the Valley is enjoyed by most locals, but it makes it hard to recruit new businesses and get products to market. There are two major highways going through the Valley but still hours away from major cities, making

transportation costs expensive.

3. Infrastructure Limitations

Just like most of rural Colorado, the telecommunications wave is slow in hitting the Valley compared to urban areas. This leaves most in the region behind the curve in competing for jobs in the telecom-based industries.

4. Sales Leakage

Shopping and consumer opportunities in the Valley are more limited, which results in dollars being siphoned off to Albuquerque, Pueblo, Colorado Springs, and Denver.

5. Not Enough Collaboration

While some degree of collaboration and intra-county networking are evident, so are the places where it needs help. Promoting regional initiatives can be difficult if communities do not perceive the actions and initiatives which will benefit them. The proverbial in-fighting and turf issues are here. Growth is beginning to hit the Valley, and one striking area in need of more cooperation is regional planning and inter-governmental strategic thinking and action.

6. Limited Accommodations

Tourism is a desired goal in most parts of the Valley, but many of the CEDS participants indicated a need for more lodging, tourist-oriented restaurants, and more mainstreet boutique shopping --- basically more services and things for the folks to do once they arrive.

7. Health Care

The need for key project development in the areas of health care, medical insurance, and medical facilities and services was noted. No accessible services exist in some areas, and facilities are at risk in others.

8. Limited Tax Base

A weakness cited is the low tax base and resulting scarcity of public resources to get things done.

9. Preparation for Labor Force

Better preparation for the workforce is needed on the part of educational systems. Low test scores, deteriorating school facilities, and less-than-average teacher salaries were cited as problems. In some places, a basic need for more access to skills, training, tools and knowledge to confront economic and community obstacles was expressed. "We have a lot of people who want to do something about these issues, but don't know how," one participant observed.

10. Transportation Infrastructure

Transportation issues and the need for more dialogue with CDOT were frequently mentioned.

C. Opportunities

1. Advantages of High Altitude Location

The high-altitude nature of the Valley was probably the most often expressed opportunity. This could take the form of specialized crop development; a high-altitude marathon training center; and search and rescue training conferences.

2. Niche Markets

From alternative energy production to organic farming, the opportunities to develop very specialized products for very specialized consumers are evident. These niche market opportunities need to be explored and made into reality.

3. Tourism

Opportunities to increase tourism are recognized, but the counties were split over the extent to which they want to rely on tourism for their economies. Some future possibilities which would need to be developed include: A National Heritage Area tour hosted by the Guides of Los Caminos; historical markers and wildlife exhibits; and a tour of artisan colonies and gallery showings. A "low hanging fruit" is the tourist traffic in northern New Mexico visiting Taos and Santa Fe, just a few hours travel away.

4. Recreational Facilities

Expanding or building various recreational facilities in each community was seen as a needed amenity for locals and tourists alike.

5. Value-added Agriculture

Specialized crops, organic farming, cooperatives, dude ranches where guests can participate in the work, and roping and horse facilities, are a few of the projects which could offer opportunities.

6. Outdoor Recreation

More opportunities exist for exposing people to natural resources. Opportunities include: trophy fishing operations; guided tours; more development and promotion of the newly-designated Great Sand Dunes National Park; expansion of the already successful Crane Festival; and bird watching tours. Putting in a completed River Corridor Trail from Alamosa to Monte Vista also represents a great opportunity for a local amenity and tourism attraction.

7. Cottage Industry and Small Business

Cottage industries and growing small businesses are seen as desirable opportunities. With home businesses set to comprise 33% of the jobs in the United States, the Valley is well-positioned as a home for telecommuters, and at-home workers of all kinds. For this group of businesses, an opportunity exists to explore cooperative buying of health insurance, secretarial, legal and accounting services, and employee banking. This would allow seasonal, small businesses to use their resources more profitably.

8. Labor-Based Potentials and Higher Education

The combination of two colleges to train, and a workforce including a large number of Spanish-speakers, could bring some new jobs to the region, but would require studies of both industry demand and existing skill levels.

9. Railroads

The idea of running the Cumbres and Toltec narrow gauge train up the Valley to Alamosa from Antonito has existed for some time. A controversial proposal on the table to run a train from South Fork to Creede represents opportunities for some. Another proposal would involve a passenger and rail freight operation from Alamosa to South Fork.

10. New Facilities

Opportunities for new jobs and income from the development of new or expanded facilities include: Monte Vista's Ski Hi facility; development of a convention center and museum in Alamosa; and a potential development of a business incubator.

11. Internet Marketing

More efforts could go towards marketing local products on the Internet. Coupled with this idea would be to form regionwide marketing endeavors --- based on a "made in the San Luis Valley" theme.

12. Health Care

Developing a seamless, centralized healthcare system in the Valley is an opportunity that could utilize existing facilities and entities in some type of collaboration.

D. Threats

1. Water Loss

This year (and in the past four) the most significant threat is drought and a reported depletion of the water table and over-pumping of the aquifer. If this trend continues, the effects on agriculture will be even more devastating than the bad news sustained in 2002 (e.g., cattle sell offs and crop failures). Water --- quantity and quality --- eventually comes up in all economic development discussions in this region, and tops the list of concerns.

2. Uncontrolled Growth

Some participants mentioned a concern for unchecked growth, fearing that it's only a matter of time before the rest of the State starts to fill up. While managed growth is desired, it is very clear that the Valley residents want to maintain a small-town atmosphere. A lack of planning for growth is perceived as a threat to managing it. The associated problems with growth such as loss of open lands, affordable housing crunches, further distance between the "have's and have nots" and rural sprawl are becoming evident.

3. Isolation

Large distances between the center of the Valley and the outlying areas, and between the whole Valley and the rest of the State, often produce a lack of communication and a perceived threat to progress and "keeping up on things." Creede does not even have access to radio.

4. Traffic Bottlenecks

A lack of ability to control many aspects of the transportation corridors poses a major threat. Problem areas include lack of a bypass for trucks in Alamosa; incessant road construction on Wolf Creek; and lack of passing lanes between Monte Vista and Alamosa.

5. Fire Hazard and Wildlife Diseases

Wildfire (like the one in South Fork this summer), Chronic Wasting Disease, and Whirling Disease were cited as being devastating threats to local hunting and fishing businesses.

6. Other Threats to Agriculture

In addition to drought and water loss, other threats to agriculture include: A decline in family ranches; low commodity prices; speculative real estate buyers; and youth leaving.