May 3, 2021   Agenda Item 7
Communities of Concern: Reconsidering Our Language

Subject: Proposal to rename "Communities of Concern" as "Equity Priority Communities" for use across MTC and ABAG work products and projects.

Background: The "Communities of Concern" framework has been in use by MTC and ABAG since 2001 to identify communities with significant concentrations of historically underserved populations, primarily people of color and people with low incomes. Staff has made continual updates to the definition, the demographic factors considered and the methodology over the last two decades. For Plan Bay Area 2050, staff employed the same framework adopted by MTC and ABAG during Plan Bay Area 2040, with updates to the underlying demographic data using best available information from the U.S. Census Bureau. This adopted framework is shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Communities of Concern Framework for Plan Bay Area 2050

Demographic Factor	*% Regional Population*	*Concentration Threshold*
1. People of Color	60%	70%
2. Low Income (<200% Federal Poverty Level)	21%	28%
3. Limited English Proficiency	8%	12%
4. Zero-Vehicle Household	9%	15%
5. Seniors 75 Years and Over	6%	8%
6. People with Disability	10%	12%
7. Single-Parent Family	13%	18%
8. Severely Rent-Burdened Household	10%	14%
Definition – census tracts that have a concentration of BOTH people of color AND low-income households, OR that have a concentration of 4 or more factors, above the listed thresholds		

The Communities of Concern designations are used widely at MTC and ABAG, as well as by county and city agencies within the Bay Area. They are used in planning efforts and equity analyses, prioritization criteria in programming of funds (e.g. Community-Based Transportation Plan Planning Grants, Active Transportation Program), and alignment of resources for public engagement.

Nomenclature Update: The year 2020 was an opportunity for reckoning in our region and beyond. Acknowledging the power of language and that words can shape people, actions and culture, staff began reconsidering the nomenclature "Communities of Concern" in mid-2020. With sufficient internal consensus that the existing name is "antiquated", "paternalistic" and "empathy-evoking", staff embarked on an inclusive process to identify new nomenclature by engaging with underserved communities, the Policy Advisory Council's Equity & Access Subcommittee and the Regional Equity Working Group.

Despite this being an abstract topic to discuss, the small group discussions with underserved communities were rich and offered diverse feedback. The discussions began with an open-ended question: "What does the term *Communities of Concern* mean to you?" Staff then provided more context on the definition and use of these designations by MTC/ABAG and our partners, and highlighted why these

designations are important given historical context. Staff then sought opinions on the overall framework itself and the nomenclature by providing a variety of new options, including:

- Equity Priority Communities, Equity Focus Communities, Equity Priority Neighborhoods, and Equity Action Areas
- Underserved Communities, Equity Prioritized Investment Communities, Opportunity Zones, and Historically Marginalized Communities
- Economically Distressed Areas, Disadvantaged Communities and Environmental Justice Communities

Staff will share synthesized feedback and a recommendation for new terminology, included in **Attachment A**. In summary, reactions to the existing terminology were almost unanimously adverse. To many, the term "Communities of Concern" is problematic, triggering, demeaning, negative, vague and passive. Recurring feedback themes for a new term were that the term needs to be positive, empowering and uplifting, be forward-looking and action-oriented, communicate "priority" and intentionality and be short and easily understood. Based on the feedback received, staff is recommending the term **"Equity Priority Communities"** to describe these places going forward.

This small but meaningful change can communicate to the region at large that MTC and ABAG intend to prioritize these historically underserved and under-represented communities to advance toward equitable outcomes. Staff acknowledges that there is much work to be done beyond simply changing the nomenclature in the years ahead, and that there must be concerted ongoing effort toward truly achieving the equitable outcomes.

Next Steps: Staff is recommending to update the Community of Concern nomenclature with the new term "Equity Priority Communities" across work products, including the upcoming Plan Bay Area 2050, and will seek approval from the MTC Planning Committee and ABAG Administrative Committee. Furthermore, if approved, staff will share this update with other agencies across the region that frequently use this framework. Beyond the nomenclature, defining and measuring equity-focused populations is a continuous ongoing effort as part of the MTC-ABAG Equity Platform. While a broad reexamination of the existing framework was not possible during the Plan Bay Area 2050 timeline due to resource constraints, staff is looking to refresh the framework and methodology, starting next year in advance of the next long-range planning cycle.

Recommendation: Information only

Attachments: Attachment A: Presentation

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"Communities of Concern"
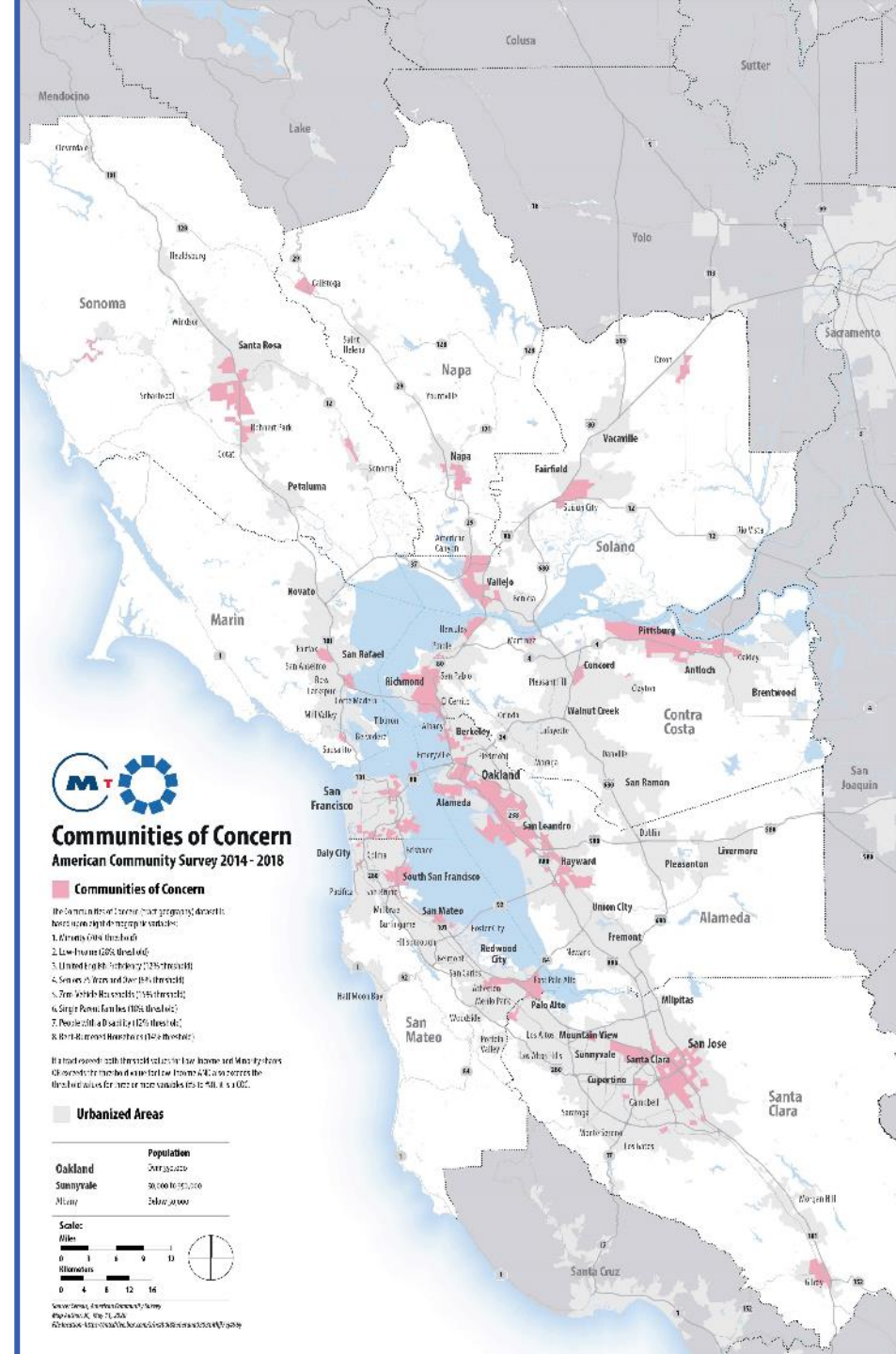*Reconsidering Our Language*

Anup Tapase

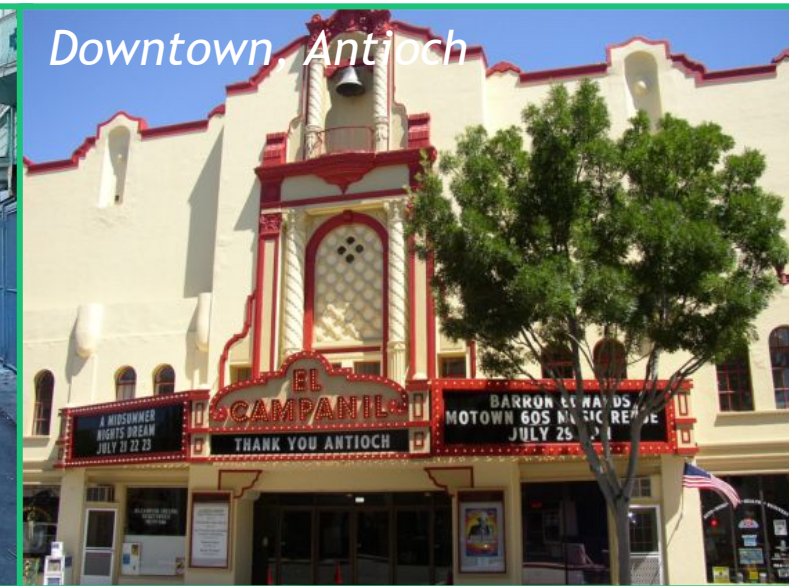*MTC/ABAG Regional Planning Program*

May 2021

MTC/ABAG has used the "Communities of Concern" framework since 2001.

Communities of Concern are designated geographies (census tracts) that have high concentrations of underserved populations. Designations are based on calculated thresholds for 8 demographic factors, including **race** and **income**.
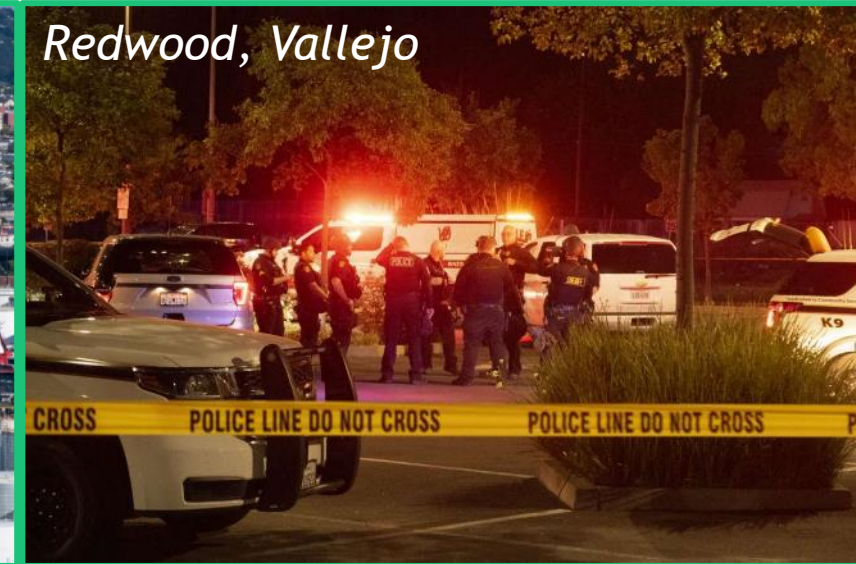
Communities of Concern are updated every plan cycle with most recent census demographic data, in this case in 2020.

These communities are **diverse and vibrant...**

Fruitvale, Oakland

Mission District, San Francisco

Downtown, Antioch

Downtown, Fairfield

Bellevue, Santa Rosa

Shoreview, San Mateo

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…but also **grapple with various issues.**

Tenderloin, San Francisco

Iron Triangle, Richmond

Redwood, Vallejo

University Circle, East Palo Alto

Canal, San Rafael

East San Jose

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How does MTC/ABAG use this framework?

- **Planning** (e.g. Plan Bay Area, TIP, various equity analyses)

- **Programming** (e.g. Active Transportation Program, OBAG Grants, Community-Based Transportation Plan Planning Grants, Lifeline Transportation Program)

- **Engagement**

- **Used beyond MTC/ABAG** (by county/city agencies)

Within Plan Bay Area 2050…

Plan Strategies

- Support Community-Led Transportation Enhancements in Communities of Concern
- Provide Targeted Mortgage, Rental and Small Business Assistance to Communities of Concern
- Invest in High-Speed Internet in Underserved Low-Income Communities
- *Prioritization of other strategies within Communities of Concern* (complete streets, incubator programs, parks, clean vehicle initiatives, building retrofits subsidies, etc.)

Engagement

- 70% of pop-up workshops in Communities of Concern
- Outreach through community-based organizations serving Communities of Concern

Performance and Equity Analysis

- Outcomes and disparities measured for Communities of Concern relative to the region and High-Resource Areas

What's in a name?

- The year 2020 was an opportunity for reckoning in our region and beyond.

- In mid-2020, staff began reconsidering the nomenclature "Communities of Concern".

- After sufficient internal consensus that the existing name is…

  "antiquated" "paternalistic" "empathy evoking" "concerns who?"

- Staff consulted with

  - Policy Advisory Council

  - Regional Equity Working Group

  - Under-represented communities, through seven small group discussions facilitated by Community-Based Organizations

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How did residents **respond to "Communities of Concern" nomenclature**?

Across the board, there is a resounding desire to use a different name.	
Problematic	• "Sounds like problem with the communities" • "Sounds like a dog whistle" • "Triggers fear"
Demeaning	• "Makes it sound like the communities' fault" • "May bring stigma"
Negative	• "Concern is a negative word" • "Sounds like communities we should be concerned about in a defensive way"
Vague/ Passive	• "Detached from communities" • "Does not address struggles" • ""Concern" feels passive – for people from these communities, the community is always a concern /a priority; but from an agency perspective, there are problems to be addressed"

Recurring Feedback Themes for New Name

- Term needs to be "empowering", "forward-looking" "positive"

- Communicate "priority" and "action"

- "We already know these communities are marginalized – the term should show what we are going to do about it"

- "Communities are continuously changing, so term should not feel stagnant"

- Term should "not be too long", but should be "clear and understood across audiences"

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What nomenclature do **other regions** use?

Environmental Justice Areas; Communities of Concern

(SCAG)

Environmental Justice Communities

(SACOG)

Areas of Concentrated Poverty

(Met Council, Twin Cities metro)

Historically Marginalized Communities; Equity Focus Areas

(Oregon Metro)

Transportation Equity Zones

(Boston Region MPO)

Equity Emphasis Areas

(MWCOG, Washington DC metro)

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Staff **acknowledges the power of language** and recommends changing the nomenclature.

from Communities of Concern...

...to Equity Priority Communities

Prioritized Requirements for Nomenclature

- ✓ Positive, empowering, uplifting
- ✓ Forward-looking, action-oriented
- ✓ Communicate "priority" and intentionality
- ✓ Short and easily understood

Some of the Other Names Considered:

Equity Focus Communities; Equity Priority Neighborhoods; Equity Action Areas;

Underserved Communities; Equity Prioritized Investment Communities; Historically Marginalized Communities;

Disadvantaged Communities; Environmental Justice Communities

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Beyond the nomenclature, **defining and measuring is a continuous ongoing effort.**

MTC-ABAG Equity Platform

Define and Measure

Listen and Learn

Focus and Deliver

Train and Grow

Near Term
within
Plan Bay Area 2050

Long Term
Part of Equity Platform in 2022+

Revise Nomenclature

Augment Methodology:

- Measure disparities for populations AND geographies

- Measure disparities with High-Resource Areas.

Re-examine Framework

- Revise overall framework to be more issue specific; e.g. transit deficient, rent burdened, displacement pressure, food deserts, etc.

- Address known gaps in methodology; e.g. definition of low-income, lowered concentrations due to displaced populations, etc.

- Recognize place-based framework is only one dimension

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Next Steps

Seek approval from the Joint MTC Planning Committee and ABAG Administrative Committee to **rename Communities of Concern as *Equity Priority Communities*** for use across MTC and ABAG work products and projects.

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Thank you.

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