

**Metropolitan Transportation Commission  
Policy Advisory Council**

**May 12, 2021**

**Agenda Item 9**

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**Communities of Concern: Reconsidering Our Language**

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- Subject:** Proposal to rename “Communities of Concern” as “Equity Priority Communities” for use across MTC and ABAG work products and projects.
- Background:** Policy Advisory Council Agenda Item 9, Communities of Concern: Reconsidering Our Language, is attached. This report will be presented to the Joint MTC Planning Committee with the ABAG Administrative Committee on May 14, 2021.
- Staff will be at your May 12 meeting to discuss this report. The Council’s input is requested.
- Attachments:** Agenda Item 5b from the May 12, 2021 Joint MTC Planning Committee with the ABAG Administrative Committee meeting.

**Metropolitan Transportation Commission and the Association of Bay Area Governments  
Joint MTC Planning Committee with the ABAG Administrative Committee**

May 14, 2021

Agenda Item 5b

**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**

<i>Demographic Factor</i>	<i>% Regional Population</i>	<i>Concentration Threshold</i>
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%
<i>Definition</i> – 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. 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 designation 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 envisions updating the Community of Concern nomenclature with the new term “Equity Priority Communities” across work products, including the upcoming Plan Bay Area 2050. 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:**

Staff recommends the MTC Planning Committee and ABAG Administrative Committee approve the renaming of “Communities of Concern” as “Equity Priority Communities” for use across all MTC and ABAG work products and projects.

**Attachments:**

Attachment A: Presentation

  
Therese W. McMillan



# “Communities of Concern” *Reconsidering Our Language*

Anup Tapase

*MTC/ABAG Regional Planning Program*

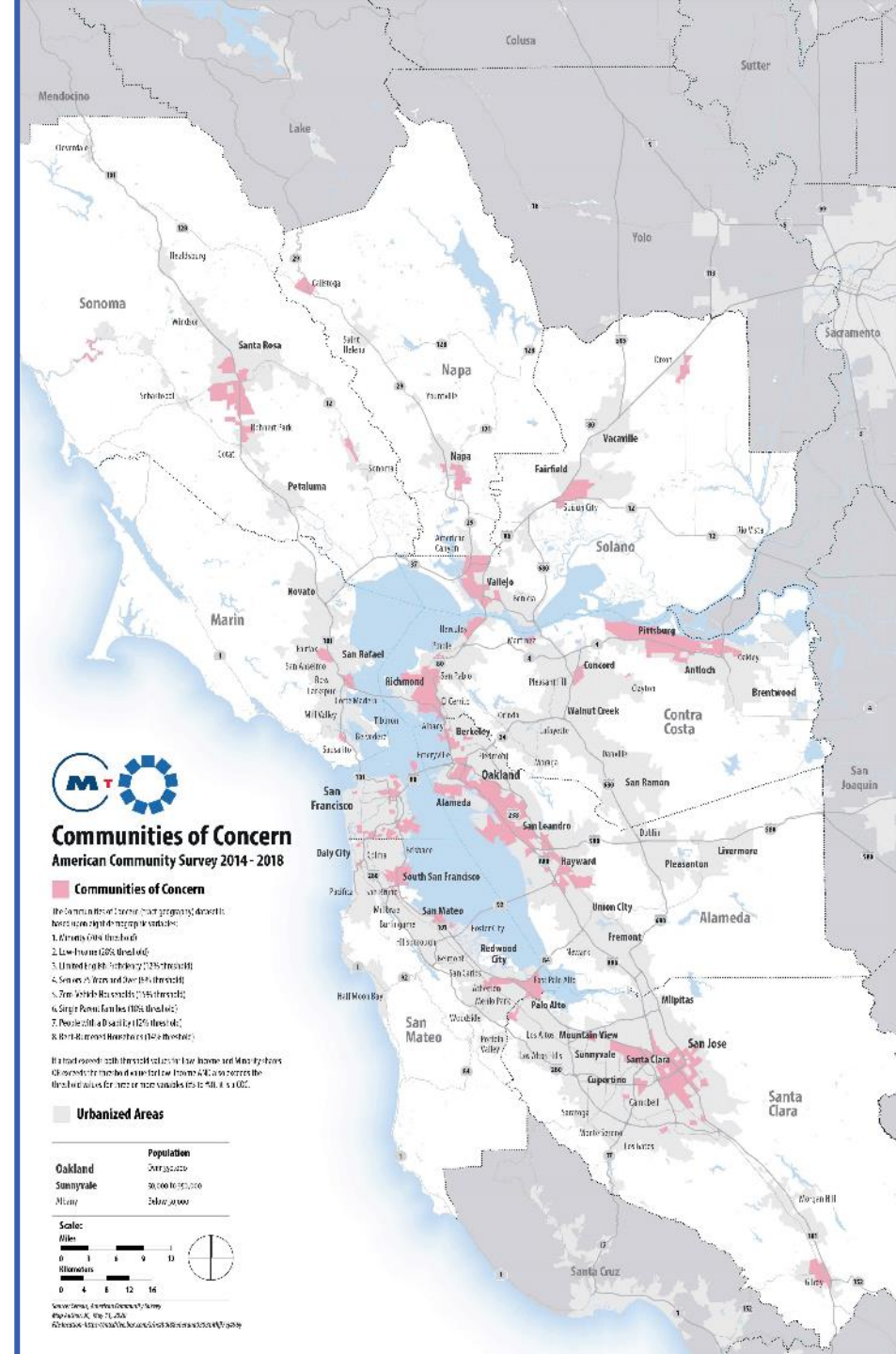
May 2021



# MTC/ABAG has used the “Communities of Concern” framework since 2001.

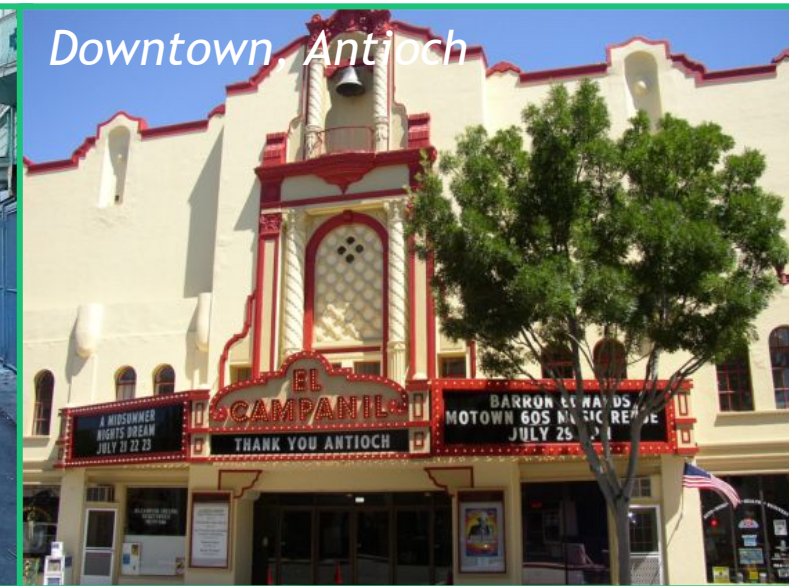
Communities of Concern are designated geographies (census tracts) that have high concentrations of underserved populations. Designations are based on calculated thresholds for 8 demographic factors, including **race** and **income**.

Communities of Concern are updated every plan cycle with most recent census demographic data, in this case in 2020.



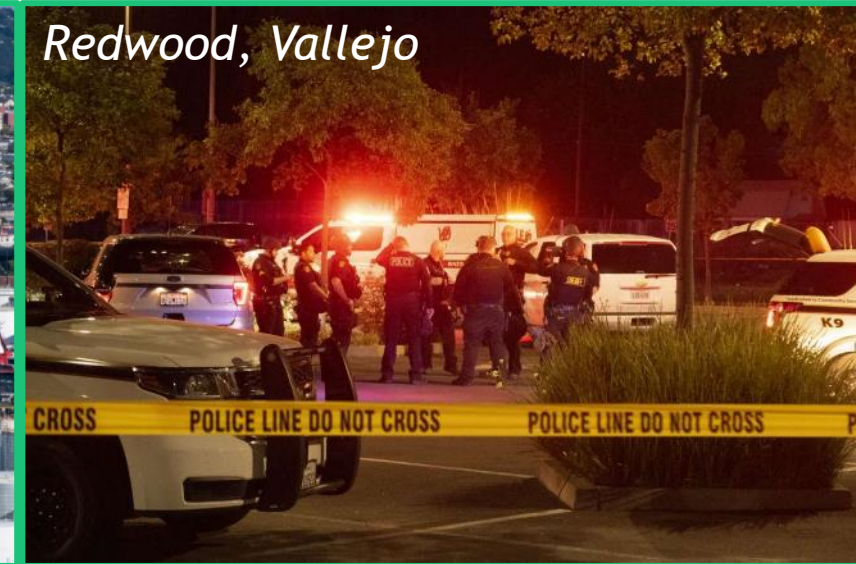


# These communities are diverse and vibrant...





# ...but also grapple with various issues.





# 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”.
- Staff consulted with
  - Policy Advisory Council
  - Regional Equity Working Group
  - Under-represented communities, through seven small group discussions facilitated by Community-Based Organizations

# How did residents respond to “Communities of Concern” nomenclature?

*Across the board, there is a resounding desire to use a different name.*

<b>Problematic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “Sounds like problem with the communities”</li><li>• “Sounds like a dog whistle”</li><li>• “Triggers fear”</li></ul>
<b>Demeaning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “Makes it sound like the communities’ fault”</li><li>• “May bring stigma”</li></ul>
<b>Negative</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “Concern is a negative word”</li><li>• “Sounds like communities we should be concerned about in a defensive way”</li></ul>
<b>Vague/ Passive</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “Detached from communities”</li><li>• “Does not address struggles”</li><li>• ““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”</li></ul>

## 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”



# 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  
(MWCOC, Washington  
DC metro)

# 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



# 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*

### Revise Nomenclature

#### Augment Methodology:

- Measure disparities for populations AND geographies
- Measure disparities with High-Resource Areas.

*Long Term*  
*Part of Equity Platform in*  
*2022+*

### 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

# Today: Seeking Approval to Adopt New Name

Staff is seeking approval to rename **Communities of Concern** as ***Equity Priority Communities*** for use across MTC and ABAG work products and projects.





Thank you.

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