

Metropolitan Transportation Commission and Association of Bay Area Governments
Community Advisory Council

August 7, 2026

Agenda Item 5b-26-0875

**Equity Priority Communities (EPC) Refresh Phase One Evaluation:
Internal Listening Session Findings**

Subject:

Preliminary update summarizing key themes of internal listening sessions with MTC-ABAG staff in spring 2026.

Background:

EPCs are census tract-level designations developed by MTC-ABAG to identify socially and economically disadvantaged populations across the Bay Area. First introduced as Communities of Concern in 1999 and refined across successive Plan Bay Area cycles, the framework has become foundational to equity practice across the agency and its partners. EPCs provide a common, defensible standard for identifying concentrated disadvantage, used across MTC-ABAG and partner city and county agencies to inform everything from grant funding and investment prioritization to community engagement and required equity analysis.

The EPC Refresh is a comprehensive effort to update and strengthen the framework, identified as Action 63 in the Plan Bay Area 2050+ Implementation Plan. Launched in early 2026, the EPC Refresh is being conducted in two phases: Phase One (spring 2026 to mid-2027), centered on listening, learning and establishing a strategic foundation, and a multi-year Phase Two of technical development, pending Phase One outcomes. As shared with the Council at its May 2026 meeting, this project aims to address limitations in how the current framework defines and measures equity, ensure it reflects current regional conditions and trends rather than only updated data, support more informed decision-making for Plan Bay Area and other equity-focused initiatives and strengthen EPCs as a trusted prioritization tool for internal and external partners.

Internal Listening Sessions:

Between March and May 2026, 14 internal listening sessions were conducted with staff across MTC-ABAG sections as the first activity of Phase One. Sessions explored three core questions: how the framework is used today, who and what may be missing and how it could evolve. The findings below synthesize recurring themes across all 14 sessions, responding to the Council's request to return with this preliminary update once internal listening sessions were complete.

Key Findings from Internal Engagement:

A structured analysis of all 14 sessions identified four cross-cutting themes, pointing to where the framework could be strengthened.

- **A Methodology Built for an Earlier Moment:** The existing methodology's data and design can be strengthened for the decade ahead. For instance:
 - *The binary designation framework creates "cliff edge" effects and flattens differences between EPCs.*
 - *The existing framework is retrospective by design, showing where need has been but not where it is heading;*
 - *Data limitations mean that stakeholders are unable to tell whether a loss of EPC designation means existing residents are better off or have been displaced.*
 - *The ACS data it relies on may face growing reliability pressures, including declining response rates.*
- **A Widely Adopted, Widely Adapted Tool:** Designed for one specific purpose (disparate impact analysis in the Regional Transportation Plan), the framework now supports a diverse array of uses, including grant scoring, outreach, project siting and program assessments. Programs apply the EPC framework in different ways, such as determining eligibility, factoring into scoring or being considered as part of qualitative review, with limited shared guidance on where it best fits. Because it confirms where a project is located rather than whether it benefits EPC residents, an important question is how to better connect EPC designation to desired outcomes.

- **Limits of Place-Based Designation:** Because the framework identifies need where it concentrates geographically, an open question for the EPC Refresh is how to account for disadvantage that is dispersed, displaced or hidden by surrounding affluence. This includes populations that fall outside its current factors, such as people who are unhoused, people who are undocumented and agricultural worker residents; people with disabilities and older adults, whose needs are spread across the region rather than concentrated; and low-income residents who live outside EPC boundaries (approximately 60% of all low-income residents). It also raises how the framework might be revised to incorporate equity considerations it does not currently include, such as overcrowding, community needs/resources, and access to opportunity.
- **Beyond the Map:** Staff envision the EPC Refresh as an opportunity to create a more dynamic and accountable equity tool: graduated scoring in place of binary designation, toggleable data layers, displacement and trend tracking, qualitative and community-generated data, greater implementation guidance, and clearer complementarity with existing state-level equity tools, with the ultimate aim of reducing concentrated disadvantage.

Unresolved Questions:

The listening sessions also surfaced three questions where internal staff perspectives diverged:

- **Regional thresholds versus local realities.** Should the thresholds for designating EPCs should be set against a regional mean or adjusted to capture differences among counties, where genuine need can be obscured by surrounding affluence?
- **Comprehensiveness versus legibility.** How much complexity the tool can incorporate before it becomes difficult to explain, defend, and apply consistently across programs and audiences with different needs?
- **Measurement versus action-oriented intent.** Should the framework's purpose be explicitly oriented towards taking action to advance equity, and how would that fit within the MTC-ABAG [Equity Platform](#)?

External Engagement:

The internal findings are a starting point for this project. The next phase, which will be more consequential in shaping the EPC Refresh, will include external engagement with communities, county partners, cities, and organizations serving both the populations the framework currently designates and those it does not yet reach. Engagement will begin with established partners (e.g., local jurisdictions, county transportation agencies, state and regional partners, etc.) already familiar with EPCs while moving forward with consultant procurement. The consultant team will then support deeper engagement with newer stakeholders and communities, grounded in capacity building, attention to engagement fatigue, and clarity about where input can meaningfully shape the EPC Refresh. Staff made revisions to the proposed stakeholder list based upon feedback at the May Community Advisory Council meeting as well as the joint June MTC Planning Committee and ABAG Administrative Committee meeting.

Engagement priorities include:

- Engaging organizations and communities that represent populations the framework does not capture well, including undocumented residents, agricultural workers, unhoused people, people with disabilities, and seniors;
- Exploring unresolved questions directly with county and community partners, including in counties with few designated EPCs where genuine need can be obscured by surrounding affluence;
- Examining how the framework reflects change in community conditions over time, including whether a loss of EPC designation means existing residents are better off or have been displaced by higher-income households;
- Learning what designation has meant in practice for communities that gained or lost EPC status or were never identified as EPCs; and
- Exploring early framework ideas with public agencies and community-based organizations to receive feedback and understand what these ideas would mean for the work they do.

Next Steps:

By early 2027, internal and external findings will then be synthesized into a formal needs assessment report. Those findings will inform the vision and goals for a refreshed EPC framework, as well as the development of options for how MTC-ABAG could proceed forward.

Discussion Questions for the Council:

- Which themes or findings resonate most with you?
- Which themes or findings are most important to strengthen the framework as an equity tool?

Recommended Action:

Information

Attachments:

- Attachment A: Presentation



Andrew B. Fremier