

# Equity Challenges and Opportunities for California Funded Transportation Needs Assessments

Jose Richard Aviles, Jesus Barajas, Brian Harold, Eli Moore, Ramon Quintero, J.C. Garcia Sanchez  
Othering & Belonging Institute, UC Berkeley      Institute of Transportation Studies, UC Davis

## Issue

California's cap-and-trade portfolio of transportation programs, which were initially created to support state climate goals, have gained an increased focus on transportation equity. Clean Mobility Options (CMO) and the Sustainable Transportation Equity Project (STEP) are two programs led by the California Air Resources Board (CARB) which include funds for transportation needs assessments and implementation grants for communities that identify specific transportation solutions. These programs support the climate and transportation priorities of state policies such as Senate Bill (SB) 350 and Assembly Bill (AB) 1532, as well as the equity priorities of policies such as AB 1550 and SB 535.

This study evaluated how well the needs assessment and planning and capacity building processes facilitate equitable transportation planning and align with program goals. Research activities included analyzing program materials, providing technical assistance to STEP awardees, and in-depth interviews. Interviewees included stakeholders, past program awardees, unawarded program applicants, community leaders involved in equitable transportation advocacy, and state agency staff.

## Key Findings

**STEP and CMO have helped to identify transportation needs and plan for solutions within communities selected for funding.** Interviewed recipients of STEP and CMO planning and needs assessment awards generally reported that the funds and technical assistance provided through the programs had been helpful in their communities' efforts to understand and begin addressing transportation needs. While most recipients indicated that there are opportunities for improving program processes and that they still face challenges in overcoming transportation inequities in their communities due to issues such as a lack of resources to implement solutions, they generally viewed STEP and CMO as a positive step towards agency engagement and support of underserved areas.

**Unfunded applicants, transportation advocates, and award recipients emphasize that programmatic changes are needed to align CMO and STEP with their stated goals.** While the programs do direct funds to priority communities for the purpose of both improving transportation equity and pursuing climate goals, findings suggest that CMO and STEP are still limited in their ability to equitably distribute funds and facilitate solutions that are both community-led and support program objectives.

Interviewees critiqued the first-come, first-served award selection process within CMO, suggesting that a more thorough analysis of community needs and resources would help to ensure that funds are distributed where they are needed most. Interviewed applicants also pointed to challenges with meeting STEP application requirements or suggested changes to the STEP application scoring rubric, and generally noted that having to continually apply for a limited pot of funds was a strain on organizational resources. Some stakeholders suggested that with the addition of greater equity expertise and resources, such as through hiring or training staff, programs could more proactively engage with priority communities to understand their needs and better evaluate funding proposals.

Regarding climate goals, local transportation planners struggle to reconcile how their STEP or CMO projects should be connected to state, regional, and local transportation plans and objectives. Providing communities with clarity regarding expected outcomes, and evaluation services or resources, could help

local planning identify system-level improvements that both meet community mobility needs and support climate goals. Other feedback from interviewees identified a variety of options for modifications to existing processes for award applications, project selection, agency engagement with communities, and technical assistance that should be considered for future funding windows or program iterations.

**Further policy actions and interagency coordination may be needed to support equity as a process for state funding programs.** Several barriers identified by community advocates and applicants of these programs require solutions that cannot be implemented by program administrators alone. Interviewees suggested that alternatives to grant applications such as formula funding or block grants may eliminate the need for communities to compete for awards, though this would likely require larger and more regular funding allocations from the legislature. Additional steps such as earmarking resources or dedicated programs for communities with critically low institutional bandwidth may help to fill current equity gaps.

Fund recipients also identified certain state requirements as barriers to a more equitable process. The current funding framework of reimbursing awardees for costs rather than advancing funds can pose a significant burden on organizations with modest budgets. Effective community engagement efforts can also be financially challenging for organizations as these often include costs that are ineligible for state funding, such meals and childcare.

Program applicants and awardees also noted that underserved communities often have housing, food security, and other infrastructure issues that are connected to transportation but that cannot be addressed within the scope and scale of CMO and STEP offerings. These stakeholders suggested that having greater flexibility in project timing and greater coordination among funding agencies for transportation and non-transportation initiatives would help them more effectively plan and implement larger scale and more holistic treatments.

**Increasing transparency of agency processes and providing publicly available resources to strengthen relationships and engagement is key.** Interviewees expressed that they had repeatedly provided feedback on planning, funding, and implementation processes, but perceived that much of this feedback had been disregarded by agencies and administrative organizations. However, in some cases, interviewees were unaware that CMO or STEP had already addressed some of their concerns. Implementation of a program accountability plan, where feedback and changes are documented, along with flags for issues that would require interagency coordination or legislative action, would inform stakeholders of where advocacy and further discussions are needed.

Additionally, interviewees emphasized the need to close the knowledge gap via collaboration among organizations with common goals. These programs could greatly contribute to building these partnerships by developing accessible tools or databases aimed to help community organizations identify other groups or individuals seeking institutional support. These tools or databases could be further leveraged to establish lines of communication and build greater transparency in the program and policy landscape.

## More Information

This policy brief is drawn from “Advancing Equitable Community-based Transportation Planning,” a report from the UC Berkeley Othering and Belonging Institute and the UC Davis Institute of Transportation Studies, authored by Bernadette Austin, Jose Richard Aviles, Jesus Barajas, Brian Harold, Katherine Menendez, Eli Moore, Ramon Quintero, and J.C. Garcia Sanchez. The full report can be found at: <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/transportation-report>.

For more information about the findings presented in this brief, please contact Brian Harold at [bsharold@ucdavis.edu](mailto:bsharold@ucdavis.edu) or Jose Richard Aviles at [jraviles@berkeley.edu](mailto:jraviles@berkeley.edu).