

Executive Summary

An Historic Opportunity

Like many urban freeways, the US 101 corridor has played a critical role in imposing and maintaining racial and socioeconomic segregation in San Mateo County. For most of the 20th Century, Black, Asian, and Latinx families were subject to redlining and discrimination in more desirable neighborhoods west of the highway and adjacent rail corridor. Diverse, blue-collar neighborhoods have taken root in communities including East Palo Alto, North Fair Oaks and the eastern portions of San Mateo, Redwood City and Burlingame, home to successive waves of low-income families drawn to the job opportunities located in nearby communities and employment centers. Now, these same communities are facing new challenges, from the high cost of housing to cut-through traffic, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The San Mateo County Express Lanes Joint Powers Authority (SMCEL-JPA) has taken an important step toward addressing these historic inequities by approving a Pilot Equity Program that will invest toll revenue from the new San Mateo US 101 Express Lanes to fund transportation benefits that serve historically underserved communities.



Image Credit: Monica Almeida, The New York Times

This unprecedented program is the first of its kind in the Bay Area and will help to address transportation challenges that limit access to opportunities for low-income and underserved communities throughout the County. The Pilot Equity Program is rooted in an extensive community engagement process and partnerships with local community-based organizations (CBO) and social service providers. The SMCEL-JPA Board unanimously approved this Pilot Equity Program at their May 2021 board meeting.

The Promise of Express Lanes

The San Mateo US 101 Express Lanes project will close a critical gap in the Bay Area's network of Express Lanes. With 1.6 million jobs and three million people, the US 101 corridor is the dominant north-south travel route on the Peninsula. Not surprisingly, before the COVID pandemic it was plagued by some of the worst traffic in the region, with average annual delay of 67 hours per-person.

This project will provide 22 miles of continuous Express Lanes from the Santa Clara County line to north of I-380. Separate projects to develop Express Lanes on other segments of US 101 are at various stages of development. Taken together, these create the potential for a dramatic increase in high-occupancy travel along the length of the Peninsula.

The new Express Lanes will provide significant mobility benefits, including¹:

- Reducing travel time for Express Lanes users by as much as 79%
- Carrying up to 58% more carpool users and buses
- Increasing the number of people travelling on the corridor by up to 18%

While these potential benefits are significant, the question of who benefits also looms large.

The Pilot Equity Program will help to ensure equitable access to the new Express Lanes as well as public transit services throughout San Mateo County and the region overall.

Vision Statement & Desired Outcomes

Overview

The Pilot Equity Program is rooted in a Vision Statement and Desired Outcomes that were developed early in the process in consultation with community leaders, residents, and our Equity Study Advisory Committee (ESAC). The ESAC consisted of planning and public works staff from cities along the 101 corridor² as well as community organizations and other key stakeholders.

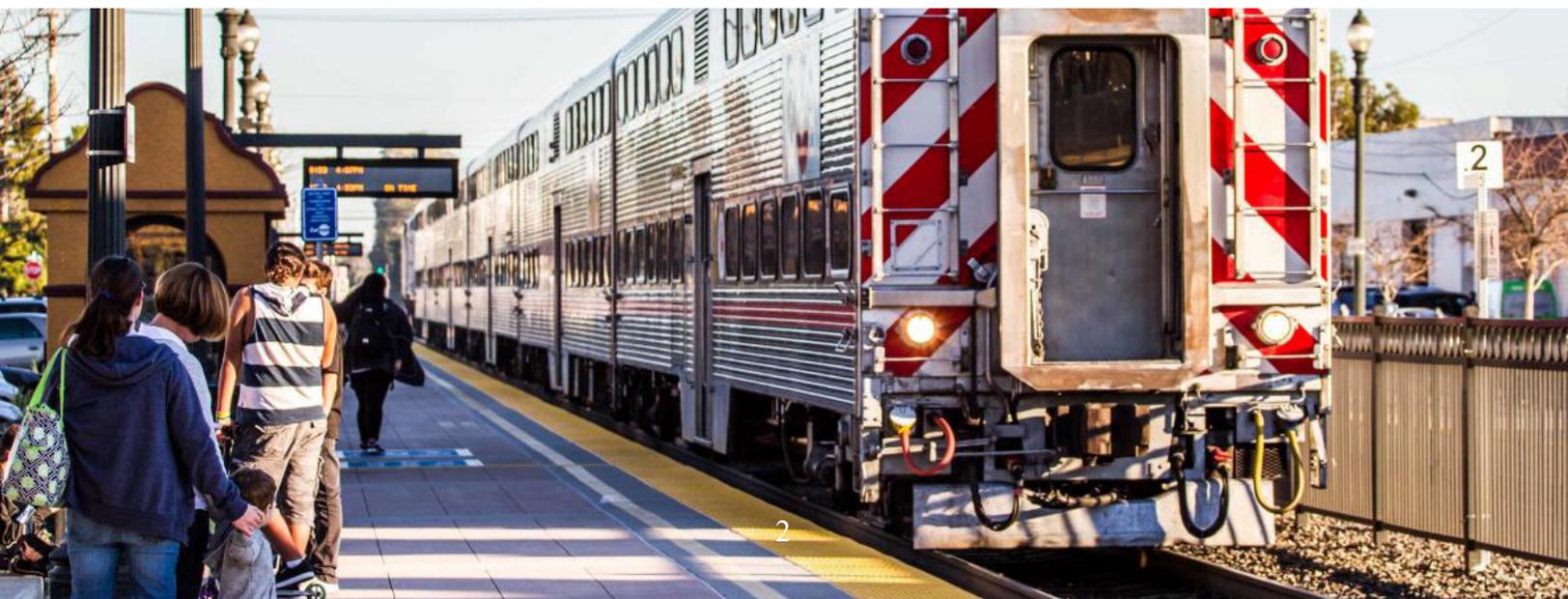
Vision Statement

The Pilot Equity Program will be responsive to the transportation needs of historically underserved communities in San Mateo County and provide meaningful benefits to those communities. The Equity Study will prioritize program flexibility so that the Pilot Equity Program can be adaptive and evolve over time, in parallel with the phased implementation of the San Mateo 101 Express Lanes and in response to changing community needs.

Desired outcomes

1. Develop an implementable Pilot Equity Program that is flexible and can adapt to changing needs and community feedback over time.
2. Identify equity strategies that are most beneficial to underserved communities who live near the lanes, as well as low-income travelers who are likely to utilize the Express Lanes.
3. Where possible, identify equity strategies that are replicable and could potentially be applied or expanded to other Express Lanes in the region.
4. Ensure communities who have had historically low involvement with planning decisions see their input broadly reflected in Equity Program design and implementation.
5. Encourage mode shift from single-occupancy vehicles to transit and other high-occupancy modes, especially within the Express Lanes.
6. Improve the safety and connectivity of the active transportation network in communities adjacent to the corridor.
7. Ensure the Pilot Equity Program supports the Express Lanes project benefits and goals, including improving mobility, travel time, and reliability.

Image Credit: San Mateo County Convention & Visitors Bureau



Understanding Mobility Needs & Challenges

Technical Analysis

Arup identified 15 target geographies within San Mateo County for the purpose of evaluating community and built environment characteristics. These geographies were identified based on 1) proximity to the US 101 corridor, and 2) criteria used by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) to define Communities of Concern³.

This analysis found that the target geographies are characterized by:

1. High levels of pedestrian and bike injuries/fatalities (see Figures 2 and 3)
2. Limited bike infrastructure
3. High transportation and housing costs
4. Limited access to high-quality transit (see Figure 4)
5. Limited tree cover, which makes it less pleasant to walk and bike

Arup analyzed Mobility Action Plan (MAP) survey data—which encompassed San Mateo, San Francisco, and Santa Clara Counties—to better understand the travel behaviors and needs of the targeted geographies. The data showed that targeted geographies are more likely to be weekly (as opposed to daily or infrequent) users of US 101 and that their primary mode of travel is to drive alone.

US-101 Travel Mode

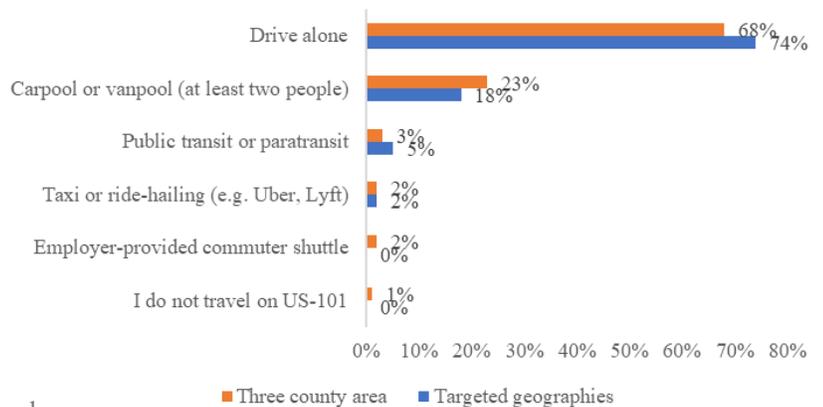
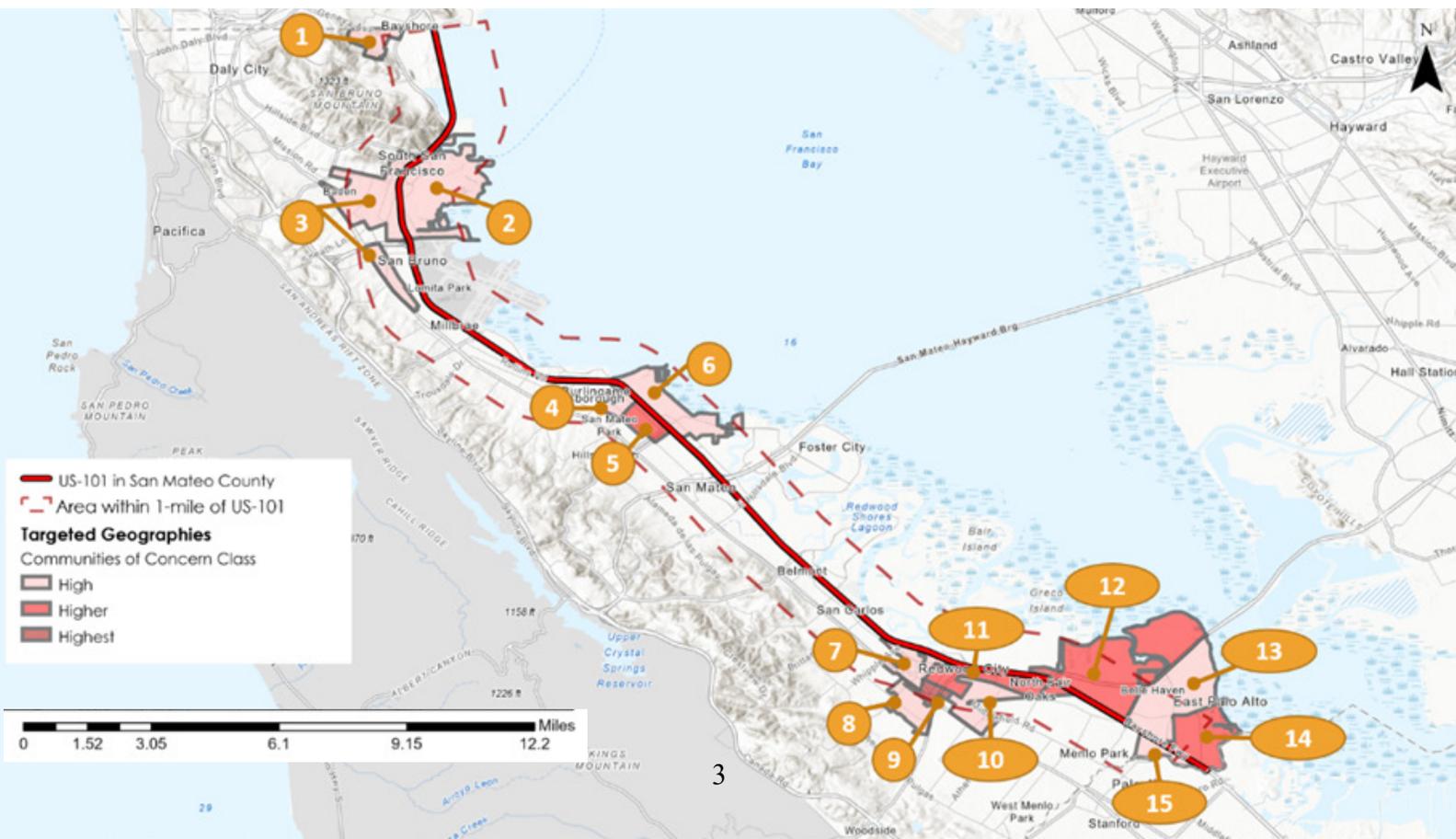


Figure 1: Target Geographies (image credit: Arup)
15 target geographies were identified to analyze community and built environment characteristics.



Phase I Community Engagement

The first round of community engagement included four streams of outreach:

1. Partnerships with CBOs in San Mateo County to receive feedback from their local constituent base, including a community survey with 847 responses
2. Interviews with local community leaders (7 interviews total)
3. Virtual public meeting
4. Equity Study Advisory Committee (ESAC) workshops (3 meetings total)

Key Themes

Limited travel options for low-income households:

Many people expressed that driving is their only viable transportation option. Some low- and moderate-income travelers have multiple jobs and daily commute patterns that are not amenable to carpooling, transit, or active transportation. Moreover, issues with frequency, coverage, and reliability prevent many residents from taking public transit. Residents of many communities also expressed that they lack safe bicycle and walking routes to and from their homes.

Distribution of Express Lane costs and benefits:

There was a concern that the potential benefits (reduced congestion, improved travel speeds, increased reliability) would primarily serve more affluent households, while burdens (increased congestion on alternate routes, increased local pollution levels, increased travel costs) would disproportionately affect underserved communities who live near the freeway.

Access to the new Express Lanes:

Residents expressed concerns about accessing the new Express Lanes due to barriers such as cost; difficulty obtaining a FasTrak transponder; difficulty making online payments; and language barriers.

Strong desire for continued engagement and a voice in decision-making:

Many people expressed an interest in continued engagement in the Equity Study and the Express Lanes project. Recommendations included: communicating about the project via trusted messengers; ensuring unbanked people can access the program; and mitigating potential confusion about where and how these benefits can be used.



Figure 2: Pedestrian Injuries and Fatalities (image credit: Arup)

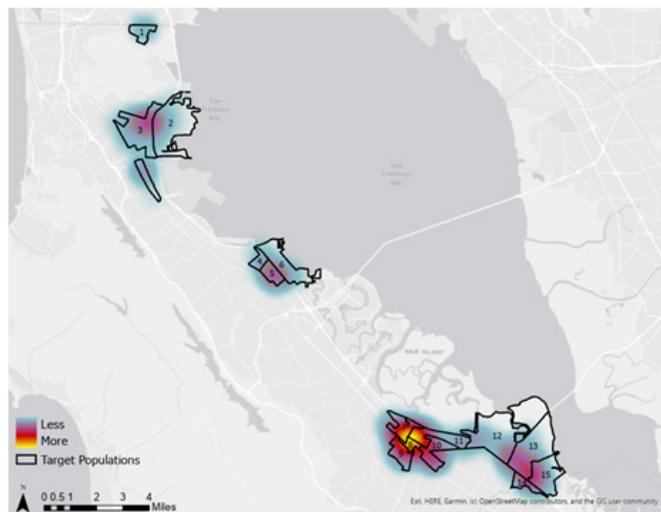


Figure 3: Bicycle Injuries and Fatalities (image credit: Arup)

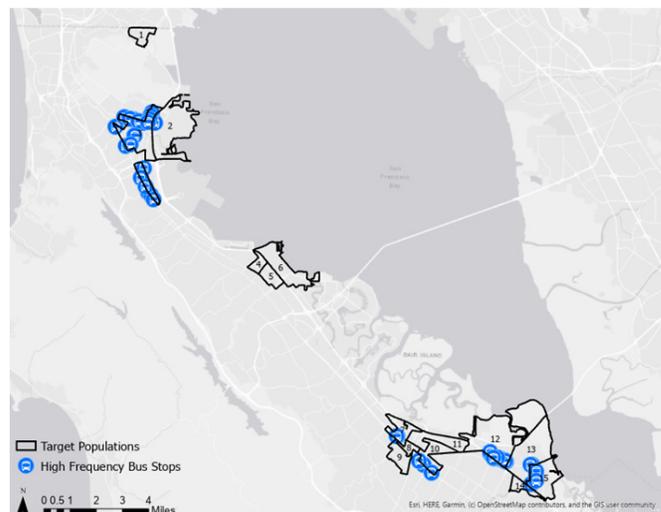


Figure 4: High-Frequency Bus Stops (image credit: Arup)

Equity Program Alternatives

The project team developed four Equity Program Alternatives based on the community needs identified in Phase I. We then vetted these alternatives through a technical evaluation as well as a second phase of community engagement.

Alternative 1 Pre-Loaded Toll Tags

Provide eligible recipients with a new FasTrak Flex toll tag that has been pre-loaded with \$50 cash value.

Alternative 2 Cash on Clipper

Provide eligible recipients with \$50 cash value on a new or existing Clipper Card.

Alternative 3 Place-Based Improvements

Construct pedestrian, bicycle, and transit safety improvements in historically disadvantaged neighborhoods throughout San Mateo County.

Alternative 4 Carpool Rewards Program

Provide eligible recipients with up to \$50 cash value for making carpool trips.

Technical Evaluation of the Alternatives

Arup developed an Equity Policy Evaluation Tool (EPET) to evaluate the performance of the four Equity Program Alternatives. The technical evaluation found that no single alternative clearly outperformed the others.

Traffic Operations

None of the alternatives would have a meaningful impact on travel speeds. Alternative 1 (Pre-Loaded Toll Tags) and Alternative 4 (Carpool Rewards Program) could result in a slight decrease in speeds for the Express Lanes and a slight increase in travel speeds for general purpose lanes. However, these speed changes would be negligible from a traffic operations standpoint.

Travel Costs

Alternatives 1 (Pre-Loaded Toll Tags) and 4 (Carpool Rewards Program) could result in a 2% decrease in average household travel costs for auto drivers. Alternative 2 (Cash on Clipper) could result in a 3% decrease in average household travel costs for transit riders. Alternative 3 would not have any household cost impacts.

Place-Based Impacts

Alternative 3 (Place-Based Improvements) could have a positive impact on place-based metrics including first-last mile access, pedestrian and bicycle safety, availability of bicycle infrastructure, and urban heat island (missing tree canopy). The other alternatives would not have an impact, positive or negative, on any of these place-based metrics.

Phase II Community Engagement

The second round of community engagement included four streams of outreach:

1. Community meeting ‘roadshow’ (17 meetings total)
2. Interviews with low-income individuals and representatives from local social service providers and CBOs (10 interviews total)
3. Multilingual virtual public meeting
4. Equity Study Advisory Committee (ESAC) workshop

Participants in ‘roadshow’ meetings expressed the most support for Alternatives 1 and 2 (or hybrid of Alternatives 1 and 2). Participants raised the value of providing access to the Express Lanes versus supporting public transit, which would encourage mode-shift and benefit people who don’t have access to a vehicle.

Interview participants expressed the most support for Alternatives 1 and 3. Many felt that it was important to provide access to the new Express Lanes. The vast majority of interview participants highlighted the need for safety improvements, especially at bus stops, though they also acknowledged that other funding sources exist for these improvements.

Successful program implementation is dependent upon a multilingual, culturally-sensitive education on a) how to use the Express Lanes and b) how to access the Pilot Equity Program.

There is a desire for additional funding to provide more substantial benefits. Many participants said \$50 is too low to be a meaningful benefit.

Pilot Equity Program Recommendation

Overview

The Pilot Equity Program responds to the community needs and challenges that were identified over the course of this study. We recognize that disadvantaged residents in San Mateo County have a variety of transportation needs: some households rely solely on public transit, while others require a vehicle to juggle complex commute schedules. Many households share a single vehicle, and kids and seniors disproportionately rely on public transit and walking or biking to get to get around. In developing the Equity Program, we aimed to provide benefits that would meet the breadth of these needs, while still ensuring that the individual program benefits are deep enough to make a substantial difference in expanding people's transportation options.

In May 2021, the SMCEL-JPA adopted a resolution to develop an implementation plan based on the Pilot Equity Program.

The Pilot Equity Program recommendation consists of four parts:

1. Pre-loaded toll tags

Provide eligible recipients with a new FasTrak Flex toll tag that has been pre-loaded with \$50 cash value. This would be a one-time benefit for eligible households/vehicle owners. The recipient could re-load the toll tag with cash once the initial \$50 has been spent down, or use the toll tag to carpool in the Express Lanes for free (vehicles must have three or more people to carpool for free in the Express Lanes).

2. Cash on Clipper

Provide eligible recipients with \$50 cash value on a new or existing Clipper Card. This would be an annual benefit for eligible individuals with no limit to the number of people who could apply per-household. The recipient could re-load their Clipper Card with cash once the initial \$50 has been spent down.

3. Enroll qualified individuals in Clipper START and FasTrak START

A portion of program resources should be devoted to enrolling qualifying individuals in two regional programs that provide significant benefits to low-income travelers. Both of these programs are administered by the MTC.

- Clipper START provides eligible users with a discount on regional transit services, including 50% discount on SamTrans and Caltrain and a 30% discount on BART. Clipper START is currently underway as a pilot program.
- Once operational, FasTrak START is anticipated to provide eligible users with discounted toll prices for Express Lanes. This program is currently under development, so the exact discount and enrollment requirements are still to be determined.

4. Provide capacity to local organizations to educate and enroll participants

Barriers such as a lack of internet access and limited English proficiency could limit the reach and impact of the Pilot Equity Program. Local service providers and CBOs are already deeply embedded in the community and can help ensure that the Pilot Equity Program reaches those who need it most. Resources should be made available to partner with social services providers and CBOs for continued outreach, education, and enrollment.



Image Credit: San Mateo Daily Journal



Funding

The SMCEL-JPA has committed to providing a minimum of \$1 million in the first year of the program and \$600,000 annually thereafter. This commitment is a floor, not a ceiling: available funding may increase over time as demand for the Express Lanes grows and other financial commitments, such as paying off the construction loan, have been met. We recommend that any additional funding should go toward increasing the annual Cash on Clipper benefit.



Eligibility and Number of People Served

The Pilot Equity Program should use the same eligibility requirements as MTC's means-based discount programs – ClipperSTART and FasTrak START. Eligibility for ClipperSTART is currently based on 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), or about \$53,000 annual income for a family of four (based on the 2021 FPL). For the toll tag benefit, additional coordination with MTC will be needed to determine eligibility verification requirements related to vehicle ownership and registration as the FasTrak START program continues to be developed. Based on the per-benefit cost of \$50-\$70 and the current funding commitment of \$600,000 per year, the Pilot Equity Program could provide approximately 8,500 to 12,000 benefits annually. This does not necessarily equate to number of people served, as some people may claim both the toll tag and Cash on Clipper benefits.



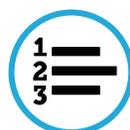
Additional Recommendations

Strategic Investment Plan

The SMCEL-JPA should develop a Strategic Investment Plan to identify and prioritize mobility investments for vulnerable communities beyond what can be currently funded through the Pilot Equity Program.

Equity Program Advisory Committee

The SMCEL-JPA should establish an Equity Program Advisory Committee to provide guidance and feedback on program implementation and evaluation.



Next Steps

The project team will develop an implementation plan in Summer 2021, with the goal of providing initial benefits when the first portion of the Express Lanes project opens in Winter 2021.

Endnotes

1. Source: October 2018 Final Environmental Impact Report and Environmental Assessment (Final EIR/EA).
2. Most cities along the corridor were represented on the ESAC. Some cities and public agencies were invited but did not participate.
3. MTC's Communities of Concern dataset is based on the following: Income level (up to 200% of the Federal Poverty Level); non-white population; limited English proficiency; single female-headed households; no- or low-vehicle ownership; transit-dependency; older adults; youth; people with disabilities and paratransit users.