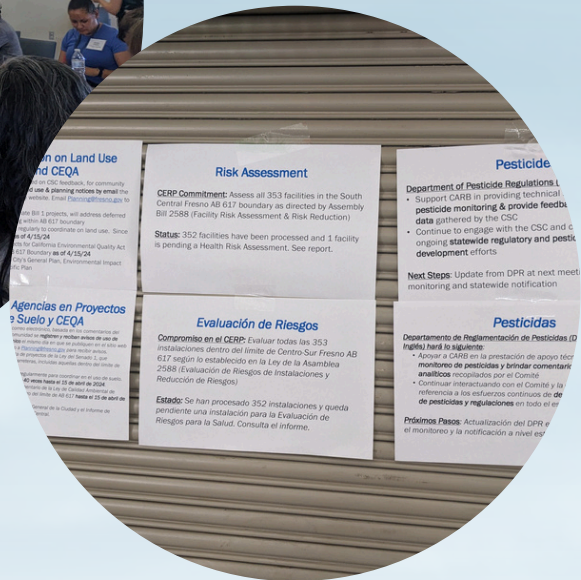


# Assembly Bill 617: Case Study Brief

## *South Central Fresno: Communities Confronting Cumulative Industrial Hazards*





## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### Community Context:

- South Central Fresno features a high concentration of industrial facilities as a result of the legacy of redlining and racist land use siting as well as new impacts from a West Coast warehouse boom.

### Key Successes:

- Community-driven Community Emissions Reduction Plan (CERP) strategies such as urban greening, vegetative barriers, a truck re-routing and health-impact study, and indoor air filtration reflect resident priorities.

### Key Challenges:

- Limited authority over land use by Air District makes addressing community concerns around hazardous land uses and implementing related CERP measures challenging.

### Lessons Learned:

- Strong community organization capacity can support resident voices. Multi-agency/ government coordination is crucial for the successful implementation of the CERP

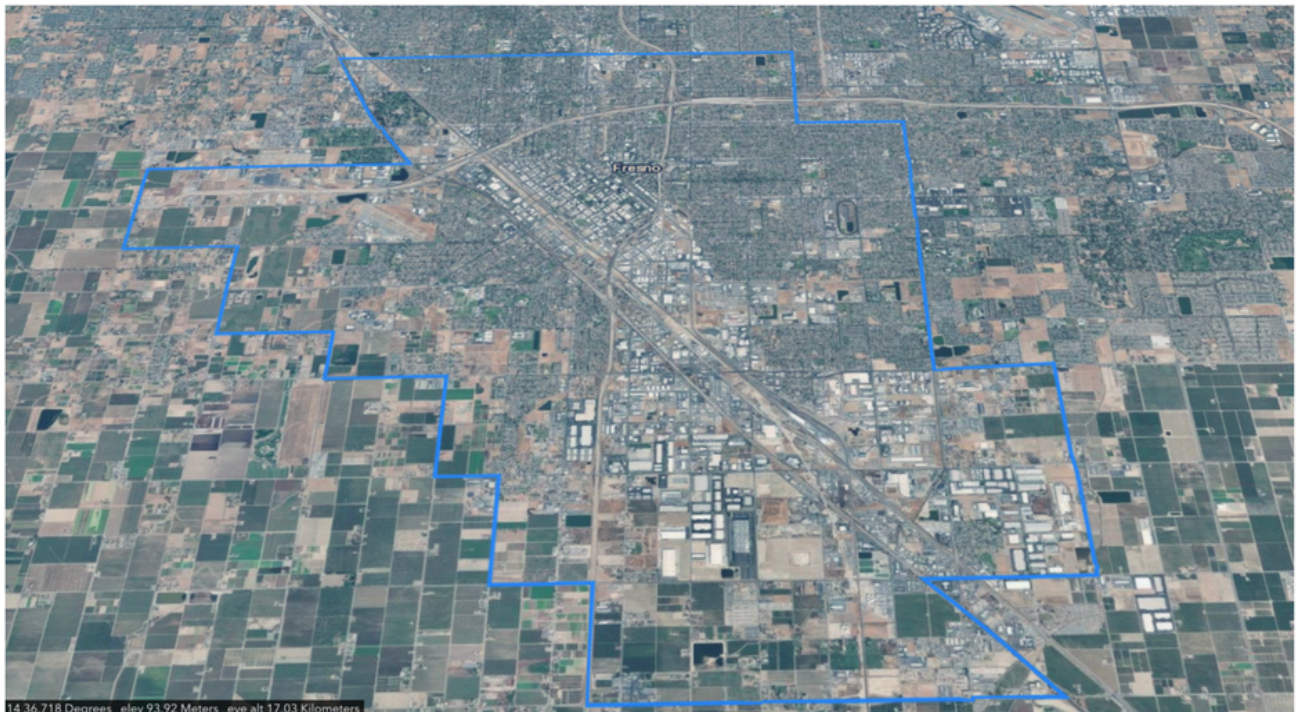
## PREFERRED CITATION

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## COMMUNITY BACKGROUND

South Central Fresno contains culturally diverse and economically challenged neighborhoods with a high concentration of industrial facilities. These include older manufacturing facilities as well as newer warehouses built as part of the state's booming logistics industry. The state highway route 99 that cuts Southwest Fresno off from downtown has been called Fresno's "Mason-Dixon Line."<sup>1</sup> These south and southwest Fresno neighborhoods rank in the highest categories for ozone, particulate matter (PM 2.5), and other pollution sources on the state's CalEnviroScreen. A limited urban tree canopy deprives the neighborhoods of greenery that can reduce air pollution and heat island effects. Residents contend with high levels of air pollution-associated health issues such as asthma, various cardiovascular diseases, low birth weight, and an overall life expectancy that is 8 years lower than residents in Fresno's wealthier neighborhoods. This over-burdened condition is a legacy of redlining and racially-biased land use and transportation siting. Fresno State University sociology professor Matt Jendian described the urban disparities in stark terms, "we've done a very good job at sectioning off the poor. We do that better than almost any other place in the country. And it's not by accident."<sup>2</sup>

As a result of these cumulative environmental hazards and social vulnerability, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District (Valley Air District) collaborated with local environmental justice and health organizations to nominate South Central Fresno for the first round of AB 617 communities in 2017. The California Air Resources Board (CARB) approved this designation in 2018. Over the next 6 years, the AB 617 Community Steering Committee (CSC) developed a Community Emissions Reduction Plan (CERP), approved by CARB in 2020. As of 2024, the CSC comprises 28 members: 14 residents, and representatives of seven businesses, four community-based organizations, and three government agencies.



**Figure 1.** Map showing the boundaries of South Central Fresno AB 617 communities. Source: SJV APCD.





**Figure 2.** A breakout group discussion on electrification of public fleet vehicles CERP strategy at a CSC meeting. Source: Peter Nguyen.

## SUCCESSSES

### Process

The South Central Fresno CSC has achieved great success in improving the effectiveness and constructiveness of relationships between the Valley Air District on the one hand and residents and community-based organizations on the other. The process started on a very low note, with many residents and CBOs feeling insulted by Valley Air District leaders' unskillful community engagement. The process improved marginally with the hiring of an outside facilitation organization, but this too soon devolved into conflict. More recently the addition of Harder and Company as process designer and facilitator has greatly improved the tone, engagement, and progress of the CSC. The Valley Air District has appeared to learn from its earlier challenges, embrace this change in relationship with the community, and has engaged in capacity building on community participation and environmental justice led by Harder and Company. Residents and CBO leaders have appreciated this, as evidenced by one such leader.

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“We suggested that now we end the meetings with this list of actionable items, and we have the power even to decide, " You're not going to rush our process. I know you have an agenda, but if the steering committee decides that we need to devote time to discuss thoroughly this item, we're going to stay in that item and table all the other items. And I think we fought for it, and we got it.”

”

- CBO Leader

The extensive use of participatory budgeting which provides opportunities for CSC members to prioritize the spending of CERP funds allocations for specific strategies has been an excellent example of the growth of community power in the process. Likewise implementing an online tracking platform that is regularly updated for CERP implementation to both assess and communicate the progress has increased transparency and public accountability.

## **Outcomes**

The Fresno CERP and its subsequent implementation have exhibited several significant successes. At the broadest level, this is reflected in a shift in focus from solely emissions reduction to exposure reduction. One major catalyst for this shift involved the de-prioritization and fund reallocation of one “big ticket item” of switching out a diesel train locomotive with an electric version. While this would have netted large emissions reductions, some residents and CBOs opposed this incentive-based investment in industry and instead advocated that these funds be allocated to measures such as urban trees and vegetative barriers to reduce exposures to roadway air pollution that more tangibly improve the health and quality of life of residents. Public agency staff highlight the benefits of using both large emissions reduction technology interventions as well as locally-focused exposure reductions. Based on a participatory budgeting process, the Valley Air District has made these re-allocations as well as funding resident-focused measures such as providing urban greening (UG.1), vegetative barriers (VB.1) and incentives for vehicle replacement with electric vehicles (C.2). The Valley Air District is also currently collaborating with Valley Clean Air Now (Valley CAN) to address charging infrastructure concerns for EV vehicles through passenger vehicle and public fleet electrification measures.

CSC members also consider a health impact assessment of current diesel truck routes and potential reroutes through the community to be a great success. This study, conducted by UC Merced, validated residents’ concerns over the chronic risks they endure due to heavy truck traffic in their neighborhoods. Some CSC members would have preferred to see more emphasis on reducing diesel exposures in the City of Fresno’s truck rerouting plan, which instead focused more extensively on traffic safety. And yet, the plan does call for the removal of 43 miles of existing truck routes and designating 13 Truck Bypass Restriction Zones to eliminate bypass travel for heavy-duty trucks along roadways near sensitive receptors.

## CHALLENGES

### ***Process***

The South Central Fresno CSC has experienced challenges in effectively engaging agencies beyond the Valley Air District in implementing the CERP. One notable example is the inability to establish a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the City of Fresno and the Valley Air District to adhere to guidelines limiting the City's permitting of commercial facilities, such as warehouses, in the AB 617 boundaries, which could undermine progress towards the CERP's clean air goals. Despite having the City of Fresno officials on the CSC and continued advocacy by many CSC members, the City has refused to sign such a MOU. Instead, they offered to sign a less formal letter that pledged to consider the impacts of its land use on AB 617 neighborhoods. Some CSC members and agency staff considered this as providing an adequate response while others view it as a failure. While the Valley Air District does comment on the city's permitting activities (as does CARB), these agencies have limited power to affect the City's decision-making. Finally, the lack of recent meetings of the CSC Land Use subcommittee has reduced opportunities for community-agency dialogue and planning for addressing these challenges. CSC members have expressed the need to convene and continue this subcommittee.

A similar challenge has arisen in the CSC's ability to affect the actions by Caltrans (which also has a seat on the CSC) to build new freeway interchange infrastructure such as on-ramps on Highway 99 that some CSC members fear may have significant negative impacts on local air pollution. It may spur new industrial development along with increased heavy-duty traffic in the area. While CARB and the Air District wrote comment letters, these agencies do not have formal authority to alter Caltrans' plans.

### ***Outcomes***

The South Central Fresno CSC's achievements in implementing key elements of its CERP are noteworthy, but so are its challenges. Land use is one of the highest priority issues for the South Central Fresno CSC. CERP measures such as LU.4: "Collaborating To Enhance Community Participation In Land Use Processes" provide some attention to this issue but do not include enforceable mechanisms to achieve this collaboration. Achieving progress on this is limited by ineffective communication, transparency, and inclusion of the community within the City's permitting and public commenting process. Recent changes in zoning such as adding new light industrial designations by the City may lead to worsening of neighborhood air pollution. Moreover, the lack of engagement from Caltrans on the Highway 99 interchange infrastructure plan has limited the power of the CSC to mitigate this proposed project. This ineffective inter-governmental coordination and the Valley Air District's and CARB's limited capacity to influence land use make achieving the CERP's goals more challenging.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Throughout these numerous challenges with local and state government agencies, there has been a strong network of community advocates to develop a system to update CSC members about land use projects in development and in the approval pipeline. While there have been struggles in attaining a potent community voice, resident and community organization advocacy, coupled with growing Air District support for community engagement has resulted in important progress. An example has been re-defining the roles of the co-host model by implementing a more proactive and community agenda-led process in contrast to earlier co-host models. This community-led approach reaches outside of the CSC meetings as Central California Environmental Justice Network (CCEJN) and Leadership Counsel for Justice & Accountability (LCJA) staff lead meetings to prepare action items and comments with residents before and after CSC meetings. The Air District's apparent embrace of this evolution towards more community power is beginning to reap great rewards. Further improvements in coordinating the agencies and governments with authorities to support or otherwise contradict the goals of the South Central Fresno CERP will be crucial for future progress.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1 & 2</sup> Thebault, Reis (2018) Fresno's Mason-Dixon Line. *The Atlantic*. August 20, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/08/fresnos-segregation/567299/>. Last accessed January 10, 2025.