

# Summary

## *Assessing the Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned from AB 617 to Map a Collaborative Way Forward*



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## WHY THIS STUDY MATTERS

California's Assembly Bill 617 (AB 617) is a groundbreaking initiative designed to address air pollution in disadvantaged communities through local air monitoring, emissions reduction plans, and extensive public participation. While acclaimed as transformative by policymakers and environmental leaders, its implementation has sparked both collaboration and conflict. Some environmental justice (EJ) groups have expressed concerns over industry incentives and the balance of power in decision-making, while others have actively engaged to shape the policy's outcomes. Residents and community organizations involved in the policy implementation have pushed for more influence over the planning process and its outcomes. The California Air Resources Board (CARB) and regional Air Districts have worked to balance statewide oversight with local implementation, ensuring local communities have a voice in air quality management and emissions reductions.

To date, AB 617 has been implemented in 19 selected communities. In these communities Community Steering Committees (CSCs) drive the development of Community Air Monitoring Plans (CAMPs) and Community Emissions Reduction Plans (CERPs). CARB's recently updated Blueprint 2.0 incorporates lessons learned from the first five years, reinforcing equity, long-term emissions reduction commitments, and other program expansions. Despite many challenges, AB 617 has fostered innovative collaboration and best practices among state agencies, air districts, industries, and communities, serving as a model for future environmental justice initiatives in California and beyond.

## GOALS AND METHODS OF THE STUDY

This report evaluates the successes, challenges, and lessons learned from the implementation of AB 617, with the goal of informing stakeholders in enhancing collaboration to achieve the initiative's objectives. Conducted as an independent study, it is based on the principles of fairness and inclusivity, presenting diverse perspectives even when interpretations and assessments of activities and outcomes differ.

The UC Davis team conducted an extensive mixed-methods study on AB 617 implementation, observing 264 public meetings (about 800 hours) across seven case study communities from 2018 to 2024. These seven case study sites include Richmond/North Richmond/ San Pablo; Stockton; South Central/ Southwest Fresno; Shafter; Arvin/ Lamont; Wilmington/ Carson/ West Long Beach; and the Portside EJ Communities. The team also conducted 110 semi-structured interviews with diverse stakeholders, including CSC members, local government staff, business representatives, air district staff, and CARB staff, to assess successes, challenges, and alignment with environmental justice principles. Additionally, a content analysis of CERPs evaluated implementation progress, and a statewide survey collected input from 244 stakeholders across 19 CSCs.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions guiding this study are:

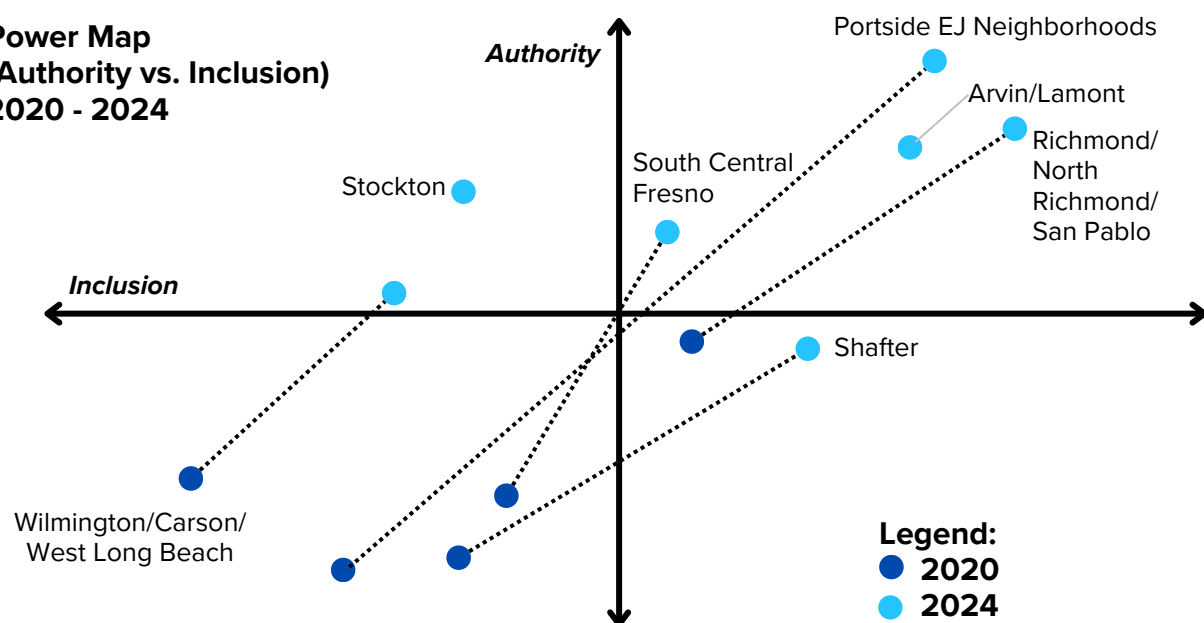
- **Process:** How well is AB 617 implementation meeting the legislation and Blueprint's goals of community leadership and decision-making?
- **Outcomes:** How well is AB 617 implementation meeting the legislation and Blueprint's goals of (developing the basis for) improving air quality in AB 617 selected communities?
- **Explanation:** What factors help explain these processes and outcomes?
- **Application:** What are lessons learned that can be used to improve the implementation of AB 617 and to inform similar efforts in other policies and places?

## FINDINGS: WHAT WE LEARNED

### *Community Power is Mixed Across the Cases But Growing in All of Them*

One of the primary intentions of AB 617 is the increase community power in decision-making on the monitoring and management of local air quality. Power mapping analysis revealed significant variation in community power across the seven case study sites, with most communities demonstrating relatively high levels of both inclusion (quantity of decisions) and authority (influence over decisions). Four of the seven communities—Arvin/Lamont, Richmond/North Richmond/San Pablo, Fresno, and the Portside EJ communities—achieved high rankings in both dimensions, while Shafter, Stockton, and Wilmington/Carson/West Long Beach fell just outside due to slightly lower levels of authority and inclusion. The most successful communities exhibited several key characteristics that enhanced their power: extensive use of pre-CSC meetings with residents, inclusive agenda-setting processes, active subcommittees, and strong roles for community co-leads rather than just co-hosts.

**Power Map  
(Authority vs. Inclusion)  
2020 - 2024**



**Figure 1:** Power map showing changes in five of the original CSCs between 2020-2024. Assesses the process of community engagement.



Analysis of changes between 2020-2024 demonstrated significant positive trajectories in building community power across most sites. The Portside EJ Communities showed the most dramatic improvement, driven by structural changes in Air District governance and leadership that prioritized environmental justice. Several San Joaquin Valley communities also showed marked improvement through enhanced facilitation techniques and Air District staff training, while the Richmond/North Richmond/San Pablo CSC transformed from a district-selected to community-led structure, resulting in increased inclusion and authority. These communities showed clear alignment between community-identified priorities and actual CERP implementation outcomes, supported by community-based organizations providing crucial capacity-building, coaching, and advocacy support.

## ***Success Requires an Implementation Ecosystem***

AB 617's implementation is based on a complex web of relationships between diverse stakeholders, with varying degrees of collaboration and conflict across seven case study communities. We call this an "implementation ecosystem." Strong collaboration typically exists between Air Districts, and CARB. These agencies generally have moderate collaboration with CSCs, although many relationships began in conflict. Environmental justice organizations and residents consistently demonstrate strong alignment in their goals and advocacy. However, relationships with industry stakeholders and some local government entities are often marked by tension and conflict, stemming from disagreements over economic priorities, enforcement approaches, transparency, and historical distrust.

The success of CERP implementation often depends on stakeholders who lack formal AB 617 mandates, highlighting a fundamental challenge in the policy's design. While some initially contentious relationships have evolved toward greater collaboration over time - as seen with DPR's shift toward supporting a statewide pesticide notification system - other relationships remain strained, particularly with industrial facilities and ports. The ecosystem maps demonstrate that implementation success often hinges on the ability to bridge jurisdictional boundaries and foster new collaborative relationships, even as historical conflicts and competing priorities continue to shape interactions between stakeholders.

## **AB 617 IS TRANSFORMING STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS**

### ***Transforming Roles of Communities***

The relationship between Air Districts and communities has evolved significantly under AB 617, moving from a traditional stakeholder model to one of active partnership. Several community organizations have emerged as "anchor institutions," serving as mediators and advocates in their communities. These organizations, such as the Environmental Health Coalition (EHC) in San Diego and the Central California Environmental Justice Network (CCEJN) in the San Joaquin Valley, have played crucial roles in ensuring community engagement, education, and empowerment in the AB 617 process.

### ***Transforming Jurisdictional Relationships***

AB 617 has created a more complex multi-jurisdictional environment for Air Districts, requiring increased collaboration with various agencies including CARB, local governments, and other



regulatory bodies. While Air Districts have received significant resources from CARB, they must now operate within a framework of greater oversight and accountability, especially addressing issues such as land use. This has led to both opportunities and challenges in coordinating across jurisdictions to implement air quality improvements.

### ***Expanding the Scope: Linking Air Quality to Environmental Justice***

The implementation of AB 617 represents a significant shift toward incorporating environmental justice principles into air quality governance. The policy has moved from treating air quality as an isolated issue to situating it within a broader context of environmental and social justice concerns. This has led to concrete innovative actions across various Air Districts, such as just transition policies, participatory budgeting, and enhanced community engagement practices, though challenges remain in translating procedural justice into distributive justice outcomes.

### ***Expanding the Scale of AB 617 Communities***

A major challenge of AB 617 has been its limited reach, with only 19 communities included over six years due to funding constraints. In response, CARB has developed new pathways through Blueprint 2.0, including Local CERPs (L-CERPs) for "consistently nominated communities." This expansion has allowed for ground-up approaches in communities not formally selected for AB 617 coupled with continued support from local community organizations, though tensions persist around program access and resource allocation.

### ***Overall Assessment: AB 617's Overall Impact is Positive But with Need of Improvement***

While it is early to fully assess AB 617's quantitative impacts on air quality, the policy has achieved significant progress in its process goals of increasing community leadership and power in air quality governance. All seven case study communities showed improvements in community inclusion and authority, with some making dramatic shifts from low to high levels of community power. The policy has also led to institutional and organizational changes within Air Districts, including the creation of environmental justice offices and positions, though challenges remain in ensuring long-term sustainability of these transformations. All communities in the study have achieved important victories:

- In Richmond/North Richmond/San Pablo, the community developed a plan to create a Community Benefits Policy that will guide the investment of tens of millions of dollars from refinery violation fines into local health-promoting projects.
- In San Diego, the Portside EJ Communities' work influenced the Port's Maritime Clean Air Strategy.
- In the Wilmington/ Carson/ West Long Beach community, the Air District has passed multiple rules designed to reduce industrial and traffic-related emissions at the area's ports and refineries.
- In the four San Joaquin Valley AB 617 communities (South Stockton, South Central Fresno, Shafter, and Arvin/Lamont) the CSCs have used participatory budgeting to direct millions of dollars in incentives funds towards community-focused improvements such as urban greening and vegetative barriers, electric vehicle incentives, road and sidewalk paving.

However, significant challenges remain. One San Joaquin Valley community member expressed a common frustration about shortcomings and missed opportunities heard across all communities: "The things that we didn't get... we wanted them to do more on enforcement. We wanted the Memorandum of Understanding [MOU] between the city and the Air District... Even sometimes, some of the things that we got, they still find a way to not fully use that strategy in the best way possible."

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

AB 617 has demonstrated significant promise in addressing local air quality challenges, but requires strategic enhancements to fully realize its potential. This report outlines critical recommendations for strengthening the AB 617's implementation across key stakeholder roles.

The **Legislature** must not only sustain current funding but consider strategic increases to support critical expansions, including formal participation from cities and state agencies, coverage of new regions, and implementation of Local Community Emissions Reduction Plans (L-CERPs). This is crucial because the foundation for AB 617's continued success lies in sustainable funding. Since 2017, the program has received approximately \$250 million annually, totaling \$1.5 billion. However, with nine additional communities added to the original ten and expanded commitments under Blueprint 2.0, the program is reaching its capacity limits.

The **California Air Resources Board (CARB)** should take on three major responsibilities. First, they must fully implement the actions outlined in Blueprint 2.0 focusing on equity while coordinating the complex implementation ecosystem of cities, counties, and state agencies. Second, CARB should enhance its oversight role by supporting Air District accountability both to policy goals and local communities. Third, they should consider developing and facilitating a new "AB 617 Coordinating Council" that brings together local, regional, and state agency partners.

**Air Districts** play a crucial implementation role and should focus on prioritizing CERP strategies through a process based on genuine community power. This requires both technical implementation and continued trust building with the CSCs. Their role in supporting participatory democracy through various leadership models and inclusive decision-making processes that build trust is crucial for program success. They should also actively participate in inter-agency collaboration efforts such as on land use decisions that impact air quality goals.

**Other state agencies and local governments** should actively participate in inter-agency collaboration, particularly in critical areas like land use planning and transportation. State agencies should consider CERP objectives in their planning processes, while local governments must integrate CERP strategies into their General Plans and ensure their land use, transportation, and housing decisions support air quality improvements in AB 617 communities. Both groups of public entities should advocate for dedicated legislative funding to support their participation while building internal capacity for environmental justice work and community engagement.

**Community organizations** serve as essential bridges between government agencies and residents. They should continue their vital role as "anchor institutions" that support local community leadership, technical capacity building, technical and language translations. These organizations should also maintain their multi-jurisdictional advocacy at both regional and state levels, ensuring that community voices remain central to policy implementation.

**Residents** themselves are central to AB 617's success. They should continue building their technical knowledge by working with community organizations, taking on leadership roles in CSCs, and maintain their advocacy for CERP implementation that matches community priorities. Their knowledge of neighborhood conditions and extensive social networks make them invaluable partners in achieving program goals as well as ongoing feedback will ensure the program stays focused on community needs.

**Industry** has an important opportunity to contribute constructively. They should actively seek solutions that improve air quality while supporting local economic vitality. This might include exploring new technologies, adjusting operations to reduce emissions, and working collaboratively with communities to address concerns. Success requires embracing environmental justice frameworks and transparent planning processes that benefit both communities and business operations.

**Researchers** should consider the following questions for future assessment exploring continued improvements to AB 617: What measurable improvements in air quality and public health can be attributed to AB 617? How sustainable are the changes in community participation and democratic governance launched under AB 617? To what extent have environmental justice values become fully integrated into air quality agencies?

Looking ahead, AB 617's success depends on sustained commitment from all stakeholders, adequate funding, strong cross-jurisdictional coordination, and unwavering emphasis on community engagement. While the program has established promising foundations, these recommendations provide a roadmap for strengthening its implementation and ensuring lasting positive impacts on California's most environmentally burdened communities. The ultimate goal remains clear: to create meaningful, measurable improvements in local air quality while building more equitable and inclusive environmental governance systems.



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