

Sustainable Transportation Equity Project Technical Assistance Interim Report

Prepared for the Strategic Growth Council and the California Air Resources Board by
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I. INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

Sustainable Transportation Equity Project (STEP) technical assistance (TA) is funded through a partnership between the California Air Resources Board (CARB) and the Strategic Growth Council's (SGC) California Climate Investments Technical Assistance Program. The STEP TA contract is administered by SGC. The contractor was selected through a competitive request for proposals in spring 2020.

The selected TA provider team is led by Estolano Advisors (EA). The rest of the TA team consists of Arup, California Walks (Cal Walks), Community Development Resources Group (CD-RG), the Local Government Commission (LGC), and Investing in Place (IIP). The TA provider team provided support on application development during STEP's first solicitation in summer 2020. This interim report outlines the TA provided during the solicitation period, lessons learned, and recommendations for future STEP TA and solicitations. Prior to posting publicly, CARB removed identification of specific STEP applicants.

A. Program Summary

STEP is a pilot grant program administered by CARB. STEP is part of California Climate Investments, a statewide initiative that has "put billions of cap-and-trade dollars to work reducing greenhouse gas emissions, strengthening the economy, and improving public health and the environment, particularly in disadvantaged communities."¹ STEP "aims to address community residents' transportation needs, increase access to key destinations, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by funding planning, clean transportation, and supporting projects."²

STEP Funding Available

CARB set aside \$19.5 million to split between the STEP Implementation Grant and the STEP Planning and Capacity Building Grant.

1. *STEP Implementation Grant*: With \$17.75 million available, the STEP Implementation Grant seeks to "increase community residents' access to key destinations without a personal vehicle."³
2. *STEP Planning Grant*: With \$1.75 million available, the STEP Planning and Capacity Building Grant aims to "identify community residents' transportation needs and prepare to implement clean transportation projects."³

¹ California Air Resources Board. *STEP Press Release*. <https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/news/grant-awards-announced-new-195-million-pilot-funding-equitable-clean-transportation-options>

² California Air Resources Board. *Sustainable Transportation Equity Project*. <https://ww3.arb.ca.gov/msprog/lct/opportunitiesgov/step.htm>

³ California Air Resources Board. *STEP Handout*. https://ww3.arb.ca.gov/msprog/step/step_handout_english_6-2-2020.pdf

B. STEP Applicant Summary

CARB received 34 STEP applications, including 14 Implementation Grant applications and 20 Planning Grant applications, representing 15 counties in California. STEP Implementation Grant applicants were concentrated in Northern California, while STEP Planning Grant applicants were more dispersed throughout the state, with a majority based in Southern California. Among TA recipients, both Implementation Grant and Planning Grant applicants were concentrated in Southern California. Two thirds of Implementation Grant awardees and three-fourths of Planning Grant awardees were located in Southern California. **Table 1** summarizes STEP TA recipients, STEP applicants, and awarded STEP grants, organized by county and grant type.

Table 1: STEP TA Recipients, Applicants, and Awards by County and Grant Type

| County | Implementation TA Recipients | Implementation Applicants | Implementation Awardees | Planning TA Recipients | Planning Applicants | Planning Awardees | Both ⁴ TA Recipients |
|-----------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| Alameda | | 2 | | 1 | 2 | 1 | |
| Butte | 1 | | | | | | |
| Contra Costa | 2 | 1 | | 1 | | | |
| El Dorado | | | | 1 | | | |
| Fresno | | 2 | | 1 | | | 1 |
| Imperial | | | | | | | 1 |
| Kern | | | | | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Lake | | | | 1 | 1 | | |
| Los Angeles | 5 | 2 | 2 | 7 | 6 | 1 | 4 |
| Mendocino | | | | 1 | | | |
| Monterey | | | | 1 | | | |
| (Multiple) | 2 | | | | | | |
| Orange | | | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Riverside | | | | | 2 | | |
| Sacramento | 2 | 3 | | 2 | | | 1 |
| San Bernardino | | | | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| San Diego | 3 | 2 | | 5 | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| San Francisco | 1 | 1 | | | | | |
| San Luis Obispo | | | | 2 | | | |
| San Joaquin | 2 | 1 | 1 | | | | |
| Santa Barbara | | | | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Santa Clara | | | | | | | 1 |
| Solano | | | | 1 | 1 | 1 | |
| Ventura | | | | 2 | | | |
| Total | 18 | 14 | 3 | 31 | 20 | 8 | 16 |

⁴ Several TA recipients were interested in applying for both grant types. To avoid double-counting TA recipients, this column represents the potential applicants interested in both grant types.

Local government agencies, including cities, counties, and regional entities, served as the lead applicant for the majority of proposals received by CARB, including 11 out of 14 Implementation Grant applications and 13 out of 20 Planning Grant applications. Across both grant types, local government lead applicants were more likely to be awarded STEP grants than community-based organization lead applicants. **Table 2** summarizes Implementation Grant and Planning Grant applicants and awardees by lead applicant type.

Table 2: STEP Applicants and Awardees by Lead Applicant Type

| Lead Applicant | Implementation Applicants | Implementation Awardees | Planning Applicants | Planning Awardees |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Local Government | 11 | 3 | 12 | 5 |
| Community-Based Organization | 3 | 0 | 8 | 3 |
| Total | 14 | 3 | 20 | 8 |

C. COVID-19 Pandemic

The entire solicitation period—June 2020 to August 2020—took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, many applicants, especially community-based organizations, faced pandemic-related challenges such as staffing constraints and conflicting priorities that affected the application process. In some cases, these challenges prevented interested entities from applying for STEP. In addition, due to uncertainty about the length and economic impacts of the pandemic, applicants had unique difficulties in developing some components of the application such as resource contributions and community engagement plans.

II. TA TEAM STRUCTURE AND PROTOCOLS

A. Overview of TA Team Structure & Process

With guidance from CARB and the Strategic Growth Council (SGC), Estolano Advisors (EA) led the STEP technical assistance (TA) provider team consisting of Arup, California Walks (Cal Walks), Community Development Resources Group (CD-RG), Local Government Commission (LGC), and Investing in Place (IiP). During the solicitation phase, the TA provider team supported application development and submission, particularly for applicants with limited capacity and limited experience applying for statewide grants.

As the TA Team lead, EA coordinated with the other TA providers throughout the STEP solicitation process. The three primary TA providers (EA, Arup, and Cal Walks) each served as the main point of contact for a group of applicants, while CD-RG provided greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) calculation support to all Implementation Grant TA recipients who requested GHG assistance. LGC and IiP served as strategic advisors throughout the process, providing additional support to applicants based on subject matter or jurisdiction. **Figure 1** shows the technical assistance team structure.

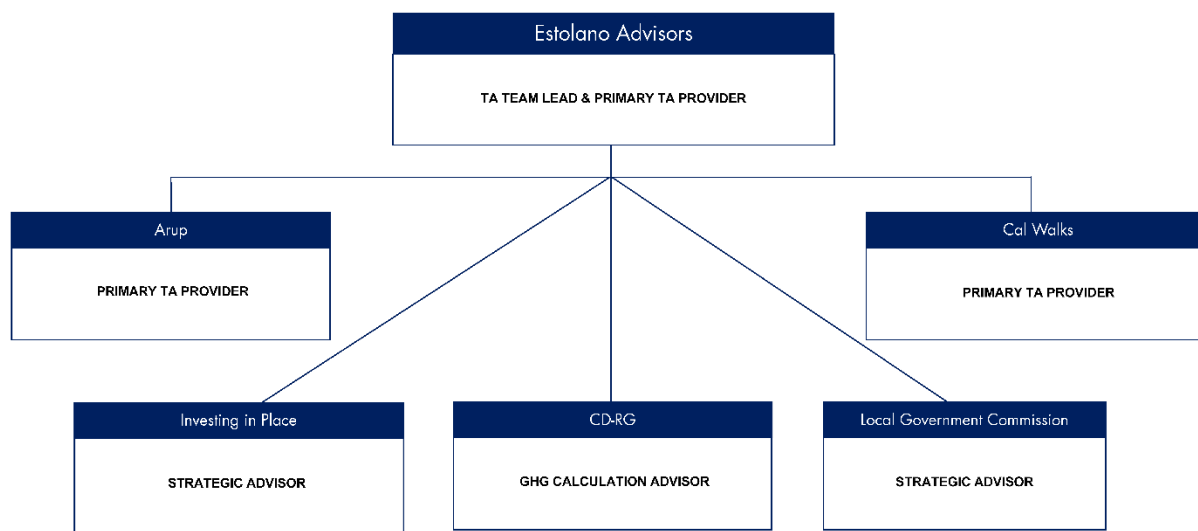


Figure 1: Technical Assistance Provider Team Structure

The TA process worked as follows:

1. Prospective applicants applied for technical assistance by completing a Google Form survey.
2. EA scheduled a 30-minute screening call with each survey respondent to gauge their interest in STEP, understand their TA needs, and answer preliminary questions.

3. EA assigned each prospective applicant to a primary TA provider (EA, Arup, or Cal Walks) based on geography and unique applicant needs.
4. The primary TA providers coordinated with each STEP applicant to develop a work plan, establish a communication protocol, and execute their work plan through the August 31, 2020 application deadline.

Throughout the solicitation period, EA held weekly Zoom check-ins with CARB and SGC. EA also led bi-weekly Zoom check-ins with the TA provider team while also communicating daily via email and Google Drive. The TA provider team used Google Sheets to track meetings, updates, and questions for each prospective STEP applicant. EA downloaded this tracker as a Microsoft Excel file and shared it with CARB each week to provide updates and obtain answers to applicant questions.

B. Summary of TA Respondents

CARB and EA received 73 responses to the TA interest survey through the August 31st deadline. Excluding duplicates, late respondents, and respondents unaffiliated with a potential lead applicant, 65 respondents from 22 counties across the state expressed interest in TA. **Table 3** summarizes these potential TA recipients by county, as well as the grant type in which they expressed interest.

Table 3: TA Survey Respondents by County and Potential Grant Type

| County | Implementation and Planning | Implementation | Planning | Total |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|----------------|----------|-------|
| Los Angeles | 4 | 5 | 7 | 16 |
| San Diego | 4 | 3 | 5 | 12 |
| Sacramento | 1 | 2 | 2 | 5 |
| Santa Barbara | 1 | | 2 | 3 |
| San Bernardino | 1 | | 2 | 3 |
| Contra Costa | | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Fresno | 1 | | 1 | 2 |
| San Joaquin | | 2 | | 2 |
| San Luis Obispo | | | 2 | 2 |
| (Multiple) | | 2 | | 2 |
| Orange | 1 | | 1 | 2 |
| Ventura | | | 2 | 2 |
| El Dorado | | | 1 | 1 |
| Alameda | | | 1 | 1 |
| Butte | | 1 | | 1 |
| Imperial | 1 | | | 1 |
| Solano | | | 1 | 1 |
| Kern | 1 | | | 1 |
| Santa Clara | 1 | | | 1 |
| Lake | | | 1 | 1 |

| County | Implementation and Planning | Implementation | Planning | Total |
|---------------|-----------------------------|----------------|-----------|-----------|
| San Francisco | | 1 | | 1 |
| Mendocino | | | 1 | 1 |
| Monterey | | | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 16 | 18 | 31 | 65 |

C. TA Assignments

The TA Team assigned survey respondents to one of the three primary TA providers (EA, Arup, and Cal Walks) based on geography, TA provider experience, and unique applicant needs. Generally, the TA Team assigned respondents according to the following geographies:

1. *Arup*: Northern California
2. *Cal Walks*: San Joaquin Valley, Central Coast, San Diego County
3. *EA*: Southern California (excluding San Diego County)

Each TA provider focused most TA resources on a set of 3-4 prospective Implementation Grant applicants, generally hosting weekly check-in calls with each applicant team. However, TA providers also supported Planning Grant applicants as needed.

D. Menu of TA Options

To manage TA resources over the solicitation period, the STEP TA Team developed a menu of TA options from which applicants could choose. Each TA provider worked with applicants to select desired TA services based on their individual needs and on the level of involvement required from TA providers. The TA Team then tracked these services in a customized work plan for each applicant. Given the TA scope, more resources were dedicated to Implementation Grant applicants than Planning Grant applicants.

For Implementation Grant applicants, the menu of options included:

1. **Project scope development:** Providing input on scope development during various phases of the solicitation period.
2. **Defining the STEP Community and GIS mapping:** Corresponding with applicants regarding STEP Community requirements, reviewing applicants' draft maps, and/or developing a GIS map of the STEP Community.
3. **Narrative response and/or application workbook review:** Providing feedback on one or more portions of the applicant's proposal, such as narrative responses.

4. **GHG quantification:** Developing customized GHG calculation workbooks for applicants and/or reviewing draft calculations and GHG back-up documentation.
5. **Post-submittal eligibility threshold review:** Helping applicants identify issue areas and potential solutions, corresponding with CARB for clarification, and/or reviewing updated submissions.⁵

For Planning Grant applicants, the menu of options included:

1. **Project scope development:** Providing input on scope development during various phases of the solicitation period.
2. **Defining the STEP Community and GIS mapping:** Corresponding with applicants regarding STEP Community requirements, reviewing applicants' draft maps, and/or developing a GIS map of the STEP Community.
3. **Narrative response and/or application workbook review (when capacity allowed):** Providing feedback on one or more portions of the applicant's proposal, such as narrative responses.
4. **Post-submittal eligibility threshold review:** Helping applicants identify issue areas and potential solutions, corresponding with CARB for clarification, and/or reviewing updated submissions.⁵

This structure allowed TA providers to distribute resources across applicants and to manage capacity during the lead up to the application deadline, when most applicants needed support. Developing a clear work plan early in the TA process also helped manage applicant expectations for TA support. Generally, the number of hours devoted to each applicant was roughly proportional to the number of options selected from the menus above. However, the hours per applicant varied depending on the unique needs of each applicant.

Despite these efforts, applicant readiness played the largest role in determining which TA services the team provided. Though many applicants requested a range of support, others were not ready for TA input until just before the application deadline. For a variety of reasons, including limited internal capacity, challenges coordinating with partners, and competing external priorities, some applicants were unable to share their narratives for review until the weekend prior to the application deadline. These delays limited the scope of TA services available to these applicants more than any other factor. While this is a common experience for TA providers and applicants, one way to help applicants access TA services earlier in the application period would be to offer an official (i.e., agency-created) sample timeline. This sample timeline could be provided as an additional resource that is separate from the guidelines, and would outline suggested concrete milestones for the applicant, including the following:

- Timeline to secure project partners

⁵ The TA Team provided this support to any applicants that did not meet eligibility thresholds upon application submission, regardless of whether the applicant previously applied for technical assistance.

- Timeline to complete community outreach (if applicable)
- Deadline to define major project parameters (e.g., eligible projects, supporting strategies, and eligible costs)
- Deadline to gather initial GHG inputs
- Window for initial GHG quantification and review
- Deadline for final GHG inputs
- Deadline to complete draft narratives
- Window for draft narrative review (internally or by a TA provider)
- Deadline for final narrative
- Window for final narrative review

Mapping Support

Beyond their roles as primary TA providers, EA and Arup collaborated to establish and execute a protocol for applicant mapping support. EA and Arup developed ArcGIS templates that fulfilled STEP requirements for each grant type, and they used these templates to develop STEP Community maps for each applicant that requested mapping assistance.

EA and Arup also identified .kml or .kmz files as the most efficient format for sharing applicant maps with CARB. Unlike .shp files, which require up to seven companion files to open, .kml and .kmz files function independently, retain basic design features (e.g., colors, transparency), and can be opened using free web-based platforms such as Google MyMaps.

Greenhouse Gas Calculation Assistance

CD-RG also developed a protocol for GHG calculation assistance. After initial coordination calls with each Implementation Grant applicant, CD-RG sent a customized GHG tracker to help each applicant input its data. Additionally, CD-RG requested backup documentation for each datapoint to ensure it fulfilled CARB requirements.

III. APPLICANT FEEDBACK

A. Post-Application Survey Feedback

After the application deadline, the TA Team developed and launched a Google Form (**Appendix A**) to collect feedback on the STEP application process and identify opportunities for improvement. CARB distributed the survey via email to all applicants, as well as entities who were originally interested in STEP, but ultimately chose not to apply.

The survey included a series of multiple-choice and numeric-scale questions, with opportunities for respondents to elaborate on their answers in free-response sections. As a result, many answers take a numeric form, from "1" to "5."

The TA Team received a total of 36 responses, representing 16 organizations plus several that declined to provide an organization name. The majority of responses came from Planning and Capacity Building Grant applicants (41.7%), followed by those who applied for Implementation Grants (33.3%), and those that chose not to apply for STEP (25%).

The following summarizes key takeaways from the Post-Application Survey:

1. **Though only half of survey respondents possessed experience with California Climate Investment programs prior to STEP, the majority would apply for these state-funded programs in the future.** More than 60% of respondents said that they would apply for another California Climate Investment program, while 33% were unsure, as shown in **Figure 2**. Only one respondent said that they would not apply for future programs.

Will you apply for future California Climate Investment programs?

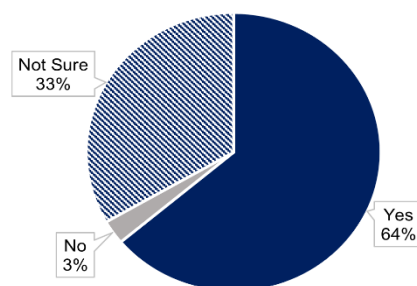


Figure 2: Survey Results Regarding Future California Climate Investment Programs

2. **Most survey respondents heard about the program before the solicitation opened.** About 75% of respondents learned about the program between October 2019 and June 2020, meaning most respondents had time to prepare

for the application prior to the start of the June 4, 2020 solicitation period. The remaining 25% of respondents learned about the program with two months or less to complete the application (see **Figure 3**).

When did you hear about the STEP program?

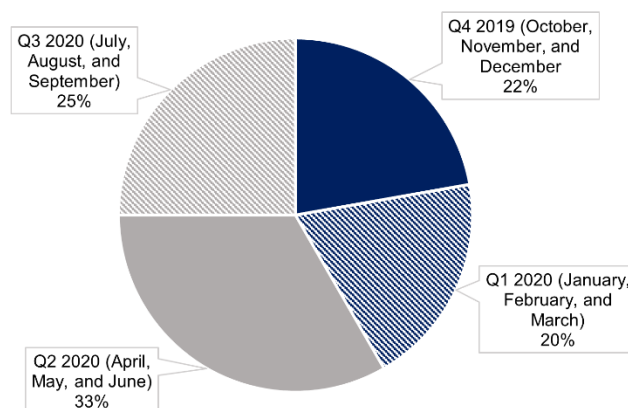


Figure 3: Survey Results Regarding Application Preparations

3. **Planning Grant respondents were more satisfied with the amount of time allotted to complete the application than Implementation Grant respondents.** Across all surveys, the most common answer to the question of whether there was enough time to complete the STEP application was “3,” where “5” represents plenty of time and “1” represents not enough time. This result suggests that most respondents were satisfied with the amount of time available; however, when we look at the results by grant type, we see that Planning Grant respondents were slightly more satisfied with the solicitation period length than Implementation Grant respondents. Nearly 50% of Planning Grant respondents provided a score higher than a “3,” while only 16% of Implementation Grant respondents did so, as shown in **Figure 4**.

Did you and your partners have enough time to complete the STEP application?

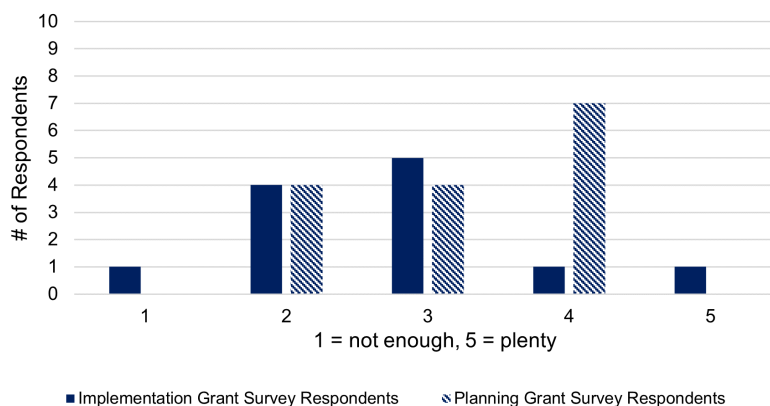


Figure 4: Survey Results Regarding Solicitation Period Length

4. Planning Grant respondents were more satisfied with the application materials than Implementation Grant respondents. Overall, the majority of respondents were pleased with the application guidelines, with more than half rating them with a "4" or "5." However, Planning Grant applicants overwhelmingly provided these high scores, while Implementation Grant applicants leaned toward lower valuations of the application materials, such as "2" and "3" (see **Figure 5**). This distinction between grant type may be helpful for understanding which segments of the application were most difficult.

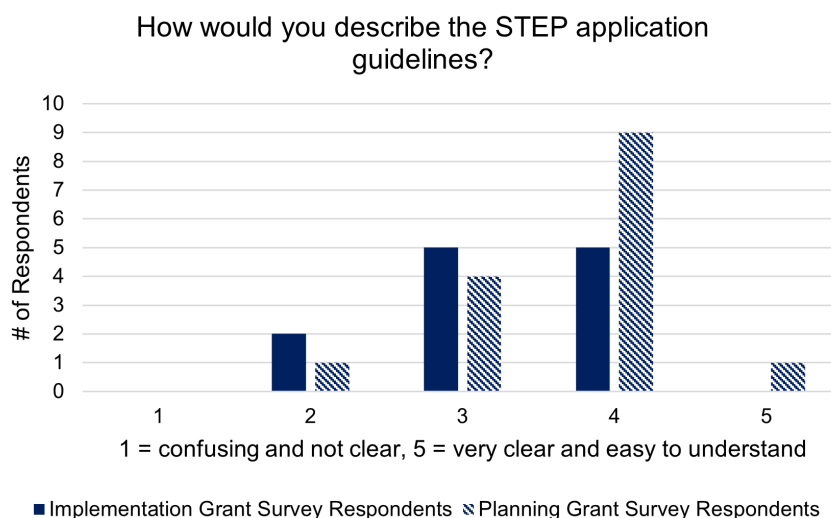


Figure 5: Survey Results Regarding STEP Application Guidelines

5. Respondents found the STEP applicant teleconferences to be helpful.

Respondents noted that the teleconferences helped them break down the guidelines and identify gaps in their understanding of the solicitation. However, Implementation Grant applicants were less pleased with the teleconferences than Planning Grant applicants, as shown in **Figure 6**. This discrepancy may be due to several Implementation Grant respondents' frustration with CARB's inability to provide information beyond what was in the solicitation during these calls.

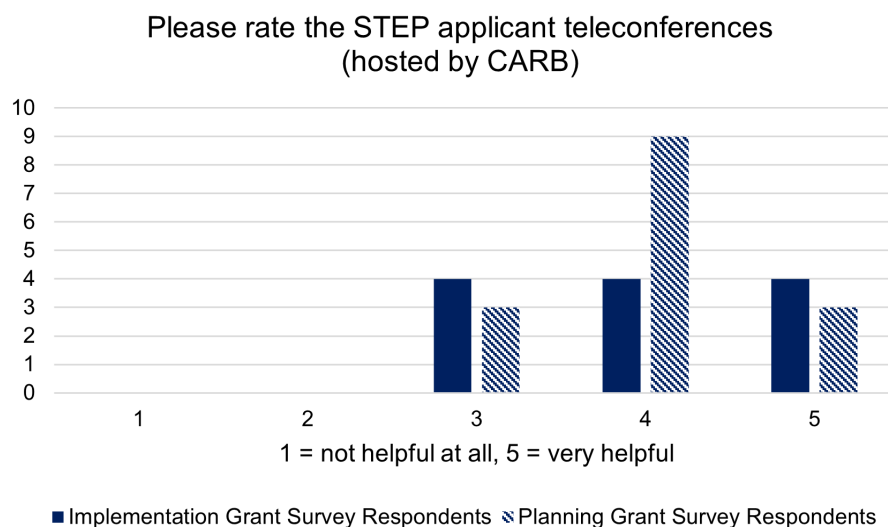


Figure 6: Survey Results Regarding STEP Applicant Teleconferences

- 6. Implementation Grant respondents had the most difficulty with the Budget, Partnership Structure, and Resource Contribution elements of the application.** These were also the areas in which applicants had the most questions for TA providers. Applicants found the Budget template to be challenging, largely because of its physical link to the Timeline tab. Applicants struggled to align sub-tasks in the Budget with the appropriate disbursement periods on the Timeline tab. To address this confusion, CARB allowed for significant flexibility with the Budget template, which helped applicants resolve many of these issues. Applicants also acknowledged that budget processes in general require significant collaboration with project partners, making this portion of the proposal more challenging.

Some applicants also noted that it was challenging to identify eligible funding sources for a 20% contribution because resources may be particularly scarce in disadvantaged communities. This was especially challenging due to the requirement that contributions must be available for the “project lifetime,” limiting the eligibility of some complementary plans and projects.

Finally, it took significant time for applicants to develop Partnership Structures. One applicant noted that it was difficult to determine a role for community-based organizations that would not overburden these stakeholders. Others found it difficult to secure commitments from all partners during the solicitation period.

- 7. Planning Grant respondents had the most trouble with the Partnership Structure component of the proposal.** However, these findings are slightly skewed because there were four responses from individual members of one applicant team that had trouble with partnership structure development.

Completing the budget template and identifying projects with community input also proved challenging.

- 8. Applicants were overwhelmingly pleased with the support TA providers offered, as well as their knowledge and responsiveness.** Across TA providers and TA types (i.e., GHG versus general TA), applicants were pleased with the services provided. Applicants appreciated TA providers' responsiveness and ability to answer follow-up questions and forward them to CARB when needed. Applicants also appreciated the TA team's support with brainstorming project ideas, reviewing materials, and resolving issues as they arose during the application process. The only ratings below a "3" came from one survey respondent. This respondent noted that they felt TA started too late, and as a result, they put together much of their application on their own. It should be noted that fewer survey respondents rated support from CD-RG due to the fact that only Implementation Grant applicants utilized their services.

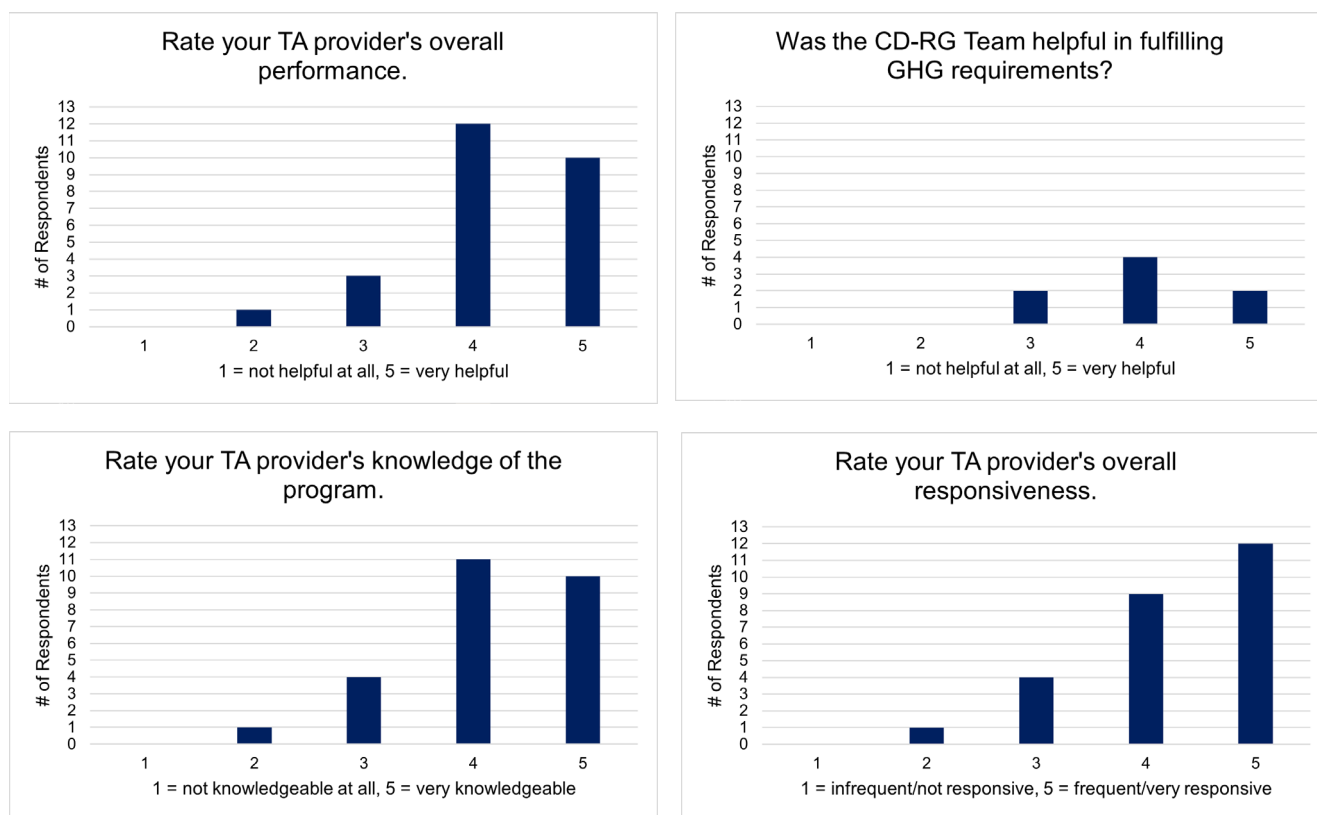


Figure 7: TA Services Survey Results

B. Additional Feedback from Applicant Drop-outs

The TA Team also worked with many applicants that decided not to apply for either STEP grant. Below are the most common reasons these applicants provided for not pursuing STEP.

1. **High grant competitiveness:** Some former applicants determined that the level of work required was too high given the competitive nature of the funds and the low number of expected awards.
2. **Difficulty identifying eligible partners:** Many former applicants had trouble securing required partners during the solicitation period. Most commonly, identifying a local agency partner proved to be a barrier for CBOs.
3. **Strained internal capacity:** Some former applicants determined that the STEP application was too complex and that their internal capacity could not meet the necessary demands.
4. **Ineligible STEP Community:** Some former applicants found that their desired project areas did not meet the STEP Community requirements. For example, due to the demographics of the entire census tract, one applicant did not meet the Disadvantaged Community or Low-Income Community requirements, even though the applicant's specific community within the census tract is very low-income.
5. **Not a good fit:** Some former applicants decided not to apply because their proposed projects were not a good fit for the grant program.

IV. BARRIERS, BEST PRACTICES, & RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Common Challenges and Barriers

As identified through the Post-Application Survey (**Appendix A**) and real-time feedback from applicants during the solicitation period, there were several common challenges and barriers to applicant success. This section summarizes collective feedback on key challenges faced by applicants and TA providers.

1. **Completing the proposal within the solicitation period:** Several applicants voiced concerns about the three-month period between the solicitation release and the application deadline. Applicants felt that this short turnaround hindered the partnership development and community visioning processes. More specifically, for many applicants, a significant portion of the solicitation period was spent identifying projects to fund, which did not leave adequate time to complete the application.
2. **Ensuring community inclusion amidst the COVID-19 pandemic:** For some applicants, engaging the community to develop the required community vision was more difficult than usual due to the COVID-19 pandemic's restrictions on in-person events. Also, many community-based organizations (CBOs) were focused on immediate pandemic responses and racial justice activism following the police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other Black Americans. Further, due to the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, other applicants were unsure whether engagement activities in their proposals should include virtual options, as it was unclear at the time of the application deadline whether the pandemic would continue through the grant implementation phase.
3. **Ensuring displacement avoidance:** Some applicants raised concerns about the high risk of displacement and gentrification in their STEP communities, while others were unsure how to incorporate displacement avoidance strategies into their project proposals.
4. **Navigating the solicitation:** Many applicants struggled to identify answers to their questions in the solicitation and its appendices. Others found the solicitation to be complex and had trouble interpreting its requirements. As a result, the TA Team dedicated many resources to finding the needed information in the solicitation, clarifying the solicitation requirements, and developing helpful templates.
5. **Defining eligible projects and project elements:** Applicants generally needed to work with the TA Team to identify eligible projects and project elements. Because project types allowed for flexibility, many applicants were unsure if their proposed projects met threshold requirements.

- 6. Completing the budget template:** Many applicants were unfamiliar with the budget template format and terminology and were unsure about the level of detail required. For some community-based and non-governmental organizations, identifying direct labor, overhead, and fringe costs proved challenging since many organizational budgets do not use the same terms or categories, such as full-time equivalent (FTE). The amount of budget information that the application required compounded this difficulty and placed added burden on teams with numerous CBO partners. Applicants also struggled to understand the level of detail required and the appropriate location for requested information within the template (i.e., under Grant Implementation or Project Costs).
- 7. Compiling supporting documentation and determining the appropriate level of detail:** Applicants worked with the TA Team to clarify supporting documentation requirements. The most common requests for clarification were related to the following: (1) letter of support requirements, (2) consistency with existing plans, (3) readiness documentation, and (4) GHG documentation.
- 8. Defining STEP Community boundaries:** Some applicants struggled to define STEP Community boundaries that complied with program guidelines. For example, applicants had trouble identifying a contiguous STEP Community due to geographic or jurisdictional barriers. Other applicants were unable to incorporate enough disadvantaged census tracts to meet the 50% disadvantaged community requirement. Finally, others found the portion of the definition that states that a STEP Community has a shared transportation system to be confusing, given that two communities can be noncontiguous and still share transportation resources.
- 9. Obtaining TA feedback prior to submission deadline:** Many applicants struggled to compile their application materials in time for TA review prior to submission, which prevented the TA Team from providing thorough feedback on application materials. Some applicants also felt that the TA Team did not have enough time to work with applicants overall, given that TA assignments were not identified at the start of the solicitation period.
- 10. Meeting the eligibility thresholds:** More broadly, applicants struggled to meet many basic eligibility thresholds for STEP. Some TA recipients were unable to submit draft materials for review by the TA Team due to various challenges, including limited internal capacity and competing external priorities. Another contributor was the lack of clarity in the solicitation about the required format for some proposal elements. During the post-submittal eligibility threshold review period, many applicants found CARB's requests to be vague. For example, for the resource contribution requests, CARB did not request a table showing resource contribution sources and amounts. Further clarification from

CARB to the TA providers helped resolve this issue relatively quickly. Providing more information on how to resolve the identified issues from the start would have helped applicants. Ultimately, CARB's confirmation of eligibility threshold re-submissions was integral to this process.

B. TA Best Practices

Based on feedback throughout the TA process and from the Post-Application Survey, the TA Team identified TA best practices for future rounds of STEP (if any), as well as similar TA programs. We found that many of our practices were successful, including:

1. Distributing the TA interest survey early in the process
2. Hosting screening calls followed by weekly check-ins with priority applicants (e.g., Implementation Grant applicants in the case of STEP)
3. Providing templates for supporting materials such as GHG documentation, letters of support, and resource contribution summaries
4. Developing a clear menu of options for TA services
5. Dividing up technical assistance based on specialties (i.e., mapping, greenhouse gas reduction calculations, etc.)
6. Using an internal Q&A and applicant tracker

C. Solicitation Best Practices

Based on feedback throughout the solicitation period and from the Post-Application Survey, the TA Team identified solicitation best practices for future rounds of STEP (if any), as well as similar programs. We found that the following practices were successful:

1. Providing an application template with a thorough solicitation
2. Including a checklist of proposal elements in the solicitation
3. Hosting detailed applicant teleconferences to address applicant questions
4. Responding quickly to TA provider questions
5. Following up expediently with TA providers regarding additional information needed during the Eligibility Threshold Review Period
6. Confirming completed submissions during the Eligibility Threshold Review Period

D. Recommendations for Future TA Rounds

The TA Team has identified several lessons learned and recommendations for future funding and technical assistance programs:

1. **Start the technical assistance contract before the solicitation opens.** Starting the TA contract prior to the solicitation release would allow TA providers to

develop helpful templates and resources for applicants to use from the start of the application process.

2. **Provide a pre-solicitation partnership development period.** Many applicants pointed out the difficulty of developing partnerships during the short solicitation period. Future funding rounds could include a partnership development period with dedicated TA resources to help applicants develop agency-CBO partnerships prior to the solicitation opening. Ideally, this period would last for at least six months. The Affordable Housing Sustainable Communities (AHSC) program uses a similar approach, where the state makes technical assistance providers available for capacity building, with an emphasis on preparing applicants for the program's next funding round. This work often involves partnership development and matchmaking. This type of ongoing assistance is best suited for programs, like AHSC, where the expectation is that funding will be available at regular intervals.
3. **Limit the number of TA recipients.** Many TA resources were dedicated to helping applicants decide whether to apply to STEP and to supporting less competitive applications. Filtering the TA recipients based on a set of specific criteria would help direct TA resources to where they will be most valuable. Evaluation criteria may include the following:
 - Lead applicant eligibility (threshold criterion, not necessarily used for prioritization)
 - Level of community engagement completed to date (prioritizing applicants with demonstrated outreach for implementation grant support and steering parties with less engagement work towards the planning grant)
 - Proposed project locations in disadvantaged or low-income communities (prioritizing projects located in these communities)
 - Community vision alignment with STEP objectives (threshold criterion)
 - Identification of eligible strategies (threshold criterion)
 - Identification of eligible projects (threshold criterion)
 - Internal capacity to complete application (prioritizing applicants with lower capacity)
 - Availability of outside resources/other forms of assistance [e.g., hired consultants and/or grant-writers] (deprioritizing applicants with access to other resources)

If there are multiple rounds of a program, TA resources could also be dedicated to preparing less competitive applicants for future funding cycles or help them identify other sources of funding.

4. **Develop an expedited Q&A protocol for questions from the TA Team to CARB.** To provide expedient responses to TA questions, CARB can utilize an

ongoing Q&A protocol specifically for questions from the TA Team. This can begin before the solicitation opens.

5. **Consolidate answers from Q&A sessions and Q&A tracker into one searchable document.** CARB's answers to participant and TA provider questions were integral for developing successful proposals. However, searching through the numerous Q&A session notes and Q&A trackers was tedious. Combining CARB's responses in a frequently updated document would help streamline this process. For example, CARB could update a pdf document on the STEP website weekly with updated questions and answers or email the updated list of questions weekly.
6. **Set an interim TA review deadline.** As previously mentioned, many applicants struggled to complete their application materials with enough time for TA review. Imposing an interim review deadline would allow TA providers to offer more thorough feedback on draft application materials. As noted on page six, a sample timeline that includes major project milestones would help facilitate that process and may reduce late submittals for TA team review.

E. Recommendations for Solicitations and Application Templates

Applicants also provided feedback on the application template and solicitation in the Post-Application Survey and throughout the TA process. Key recommendations include:

1. **Extend the length of the solicitation period.** Many applicants pointed out the difficulty of completing the lengthy application requirements within the three-month solicitation period. This was particularly true for Implementation Grant applicants. Applicants recommended extending the solicitation period to six months or longer to allow adequate time to assemble teams, collect letters of support, develop application materials, and obtain feedback from TA providers. Applicants also expressed a desire to work with TA providers as early as possible. Although an extended solicitation period might still allow applicants to procrastinate, a longer application period with a series of "guideposts" for key application milestones could help alleviate time pressures.
2. **Consider revising the application format.** Though feedback on the Excel template was mixed, some applicants found it especially cumbersome to input large blocks of text into the Excel template. These applicants suggested using an alternate format such as Word, an editable PDF, or an online form that would enable applicants to tell a more linear story in their applications. Some applicants also thought it would be valuable to have a format, such as Google Drive or Microsoft OneDrive, that would enable team members to complete the application collaboratively.

- 3. Provide more detailed templates and clearer instructions for key application elements.** More clear, concise, and straightforward instructions would help applicants navigate the program requirements. More detailed templates would also help clarify requirements and ensure that applicants meet eligibility thresholds before the application deadline. Templates that could be added or improved upon include budgeting, resource contributions, GHG supporting materials/justification, and non-CEQA readiness requirements. Because some CBOs are not familiar with public agency procurement documents, CARB should look at examples from foundations and the philanthropic community to modify templates so that they are more user-friendly for CBOs. For example, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation uses 2-page letter of intent as a screening tool; applicants are asked to succinctly address prompts that help evaluators determine proposal eligibility and alignment with foundation goals. For foundations, CBOs typically submit budgets that enumerate costs by task, instead of estimating staff hours per task. For example, in their proposal guidelines used for the Los Angeles BioScience Hub, the Unihealth Foundation requests a detailed line-item budget, including in-kind contributions, that allows labor costs to be included as lump sums, which may reflect some CBO compensation procedures more accurately.
- 4. Provide word limits or ranges.** Without word limits, some applicants found it difficult to assess how much detail CARB would like them to provide on each question. CARB could provide more guidance in this area.
- 5. Consolidate narrative questions.** Given that each project had the same set of questions, and given that most projects were integrated with one another, applicants found it repetitive to respond to the same questions for each project. Consolidating some of the narrative questions would help reduce the amount of work required.
- 6. Simplify the solicitation language and refine appendices.** Applicants recommended simplifying the solicitation language and the appendices. Appendices could be combined into one easily searchable document, or there could be more appendices so that the title of each appendix captures all of the information located in the document.
- 7. Clarify partnership structure expectations.** Some applicants were confused about CARB's expectations for the partnership structure, as there is not a clearly defined model in the solicitation. Applicants recommended providing more clarity about how the relationship could or should look between members of the partnership (e.g., whether there should be a Memorandum of Understanding among parties).
- 8. Offer alternative submittal mechanisms.** Applicants expressed uncertainty about submitting application materials and supporting documents via email. For

future submittals, CARB may consider an alternative submittal mechanism. For example, the latest round of the Transformative Climate Communities program allowed applicants to submit materials via Box. This allowed applicants to save draft documentation and gave them more certainty that reviewers could access their documents.

- 9. Consider moving some application requirements to the post-award negotiations.** Many applicants noted that the sheer number of application materials to collect prior to the submission was onerous, especially for those whose applications were not successful. Further, several former applicants noted that the level of work required for the grant deterred them from applying. To address these issues, CARB could defer some application requirements to the post-award period. For example, for resource contributions and greenhouse gas calculations that require teams to track down a significant amount of back-up documentation, teams could provide CARB with a summary or table of the back-up that they will provide if selected.
- 10. Allow more time for applicants to respond to eligibility threshold review feedback.** Providing more time for applicants to respond to CARB's request for information would allow the TA Team to work with each applicant more effectively. In addition, providing the TA Team with a more detailed list of how each applicant could better meet each threshold would help streamline the TA process. CARB's availability to answer specific questions from the TA Team is essential for success.

Appendix A: Post-Application Survey

See next page.

STEP Feedback Survey

Thank you for your interest in the Sustainable Transportation Equity Project (STEP) and for taking 10 to 15 minutes to share your feedback on the STEP solicitation and STEP technical assistance with us. Your feedback will help us evaluate and improve this pilot program.

Providing contact information is optional; you may choose to provide anonymous responses.

*** Required**

1. Your Organization (optional)

2. Email (optional)

If provided, the California Air Resources Board (CARB) may reach out to discuss your feedback in more detail.

Your
Interest in
STEP

We'd like to gather feedback from applicants who submitted STEP applications as well as potential applicants who were interested but did not submit an application.

3. How did you hear about STEP? *

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Colleague/professional network
- ☐ Direct communication from CARB or affiliates
- ☐ Professional organization
- ☐ Search engine
- ☐ Social media
- ☐ News source

Other: ☐ _____

4. When did you hear about the program? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Q4 2019 (October, November, and December)
- ☐ Q1 2020 (January, February, and March)
- ☐ Q2 2020 (April, May, and June)
- ☐ Q3 2020 (July, August, and September)

5. Which STEP grant did you apply for? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Implementation Grant *Skip to question 7*
- ☐ Planning and Capacity Building Grant *Skip to question 21*
- ☐ I did not submit a STEP application *Skip to question 35*

6. When did your team begin to gather the materials to apply for STEP? *

Please note: this question is concerned with your application materials, NOT when your project began.

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Before solicitation opened (pre-June 2020)
- ☐ During June 2020
- ☐ During July 2020
- ☐ During August 2020

Feedback on Implementation Grant

Please rate your experience applying for STEP funding.

7. What organization was the Lead Applicant on your proposal? *

8. What was your role in the application? *

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Lead Applicant
☐ Sub-Applicant
☐ Community Partner

Other: ☐ _____

9. Did you and your partners have enough time to complete the STEP application? *

Mark only one oval.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Not nearly enough time | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Plenty of time |

10. Please provide any additional comments on the application timeline.

11. How would you describe the STEP application guidelines? *

Mark only one oval.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Confusing and not clear | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Very clear and easy to understand |

12. Please provide any additional comments on the application guidelines.

13. Please rate your experience using the proposal template. *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Very difficult to use ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Very easy to use

14. Please provide any additional comments on the proposal template.

15. Please rate the STEP applicant teleconferences (hosted by CARB on 6/30, 7/22, and 8/13)? *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Not helpful at all ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Very helpful

16. Please provide any additional comments on the applicant teleconferences.

17. With as much detail as you wish, please elaborate on the process of putting your application together.

CARB would like to understand more about the process applicants underwent to develop partnerships, project scopes, and budgets. Providing this detail will help CARB as it considers making adjustments to future funding programs.

18. What were the biggest challenges you faced applying for the STEP Implementation Grant? Please choose up to three options. *

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Resource contribution requirements (e.g. meeting 20% requirement, assembling documentation, etc.)
- ☐ Readiness requirements (e.g. CEQA requirements, non-CEQA readiness, etc.)
- ☐ Budget (e.g. estimating labor costs, completing Budget and Timeline tabs in proposal template, etc.)
- ☐ Partnership structure (e.g. identifying sub-applicants, identifying community partners, providing letters of support, etc.)
- ☐ Greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction calculations (e.g. using the Benefits Calculator, assembling documentation)
- ☐ STEP Community (e.g. meeting 50% disadvantaged community requirement, meeting requirement for contiguous STEP Community, identifying project locations, submitting map files to CARB, etc.)
- ☐ Narrative (e.g. describing the community vision, describing the individual project(s))
- ☐ Identifying projects with community input (difficulty engaging target communities, outreach challenges due to COVID-19)

Other: ☐ _____

19. Please elaborate on the challenge(s) you identified above.

20. Did you receive technical assistance? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes *Skip to question 38*

☐ No *Skip to question 48*

Feedback on Planning and Capacity Building Grant

Please rate your experience applying for STEP funding.

21. What organization was the Lead Applicant on your proposal? *

22. What was your role in the application? *

Check all that apply.

☐ Lead Applicant

☐ Sub-Applicant

☐ Community Partner

Other: ☐ _____

23. Did you and your partners have enough time to complete the STEP application? *

Mark only one oval.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Not nearly enough time | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Plenty of time |

24. Please provide any additional comments on the application timeline.

25. How would you describe the STEP application guidelines? *

Mark only one oval.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Confusing and not clear | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Very clear and easy to understand |

26. Please provide any additional comments on the application guidelines.

27. Please rate your experience using the proposal template. *

Mark only one oval.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| Very difficult to use | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Very easy to use |

28. Please provide any additional comments on the proposal template.

29. Please rate the STEP applicant teleconferences (hosted by CARB on 6/30, 7/22, and 8/13)? *

Mark only one oval.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| Not helpful at all | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Very helpful |

30. Please provide any additional comments on the applicant teleconferences.

31. With as much detail as you wish, please elaborate on the process of putting your application together.

CARB would like to understand more about how applicants managed their application submittals, including the process for partnership development, project scoping, and budgeting. Providing this detail will help CARB as it considers making adjustments to future funding programs.

32. What were the biggest challenges you faced applying for the STEP Planning and Capacity Building Grant? Please choose up to two options. *

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Budget (e.g. estimating labor costs, completing Budget and Timeline tabs in proposal template, etc.)
- ☐ Partnership Structure (e.g. identifying sub-applicants, identifying community partners, providing letters of support, etc.)
- ☐ STEP Community (e.g. meeting 50% disadvantaged community requirement, meeting requirement for contiguous STEP Community, identifying project locations, submitting map files to CARB, etc.)
- ☐ Narrative (e.g. describing the community vision, describing the individual project(s))
- ☐ Identifying projects with community input (difficulty engaging target communities, outreach challenges due to COVID-19)

Other: ☐ _____

33. Please elaborate on the challenge(s) you identified above.

34. Did you receive technical assistance? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes *Skip to question 38*

☐ No *Skip to question 48*

Non-Submittal Feedback

35. Why did you not apply for STEP despite initially expressing interest? *

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Not enough staff capacity to apply
- ☐ Not enough time to apply
- ☐ Confusing guidelines
- ☐ Not enough funding available for the level of work entailed in developing an application
- ☐ Not able to identify required partners
- ☐ Projects they wanted to propose were not eligible
- ☐ Thought our projects were not competitive enough
- ☐ Difficulty identifying projects with community input

Other: ☐ _____

36. Please elaborate on why you did not apply to STEP.

37. Did you receive technical assistance? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes *Skip to question 38*

☐ No *Skip to question 48*

Technical Assistance Feedback

38. Which of the following teams provided technical assistance for your application? (Check all that apply) *

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Arup (Audrey, Autumn, Christa, and/or Martha)
☐ Cal Walks (Miha and/or Wendy)
☐ Estolano Advisors (Charlotte, Richard, and/or Riley O'Brien)
☐ CD-RG (Kevin or Riley Jones)

Other: ☐ _____

39. Rate your TA provider's overall performance. *

Mark only one oval.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| Not helpful at all | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Very helpful |

40. Rate your TA provider's knowledge of the program. *

Mark only one oval.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| Not knowledgeable at all | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Very knowledgeable |

41. What was the most valuable aspect of the technical assistance you received? Please explain.

42. Did you have additional technical assistance needs that were unmet? Please explain.

43. Rate your TA provider(s) overall responsiveness. *

Mark only one oval.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---|
| Infrequent communication, not responsive | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Frequent communication, very responsive |

44. Please describe your primary method(s) of communication with the technical assistance team (e.g., phone call, video conference, email). How can communications be improved in the future?

45. For Implementation Grant applicants: Was the technical assistance team from Community Development Resource Group (CD-RG) helpful in fulfilling GHG requirements (e.g. completing the Benefits Calculator, submitting documentation, etc.)?

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Not helpful at all ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Very helpful

46. Please provide any additional comments on the GHG requirements technical assistance process.

47. Do you have any other feedback for the technical assistance team?

Familiarity with California Climate Investments

This section is optional, but responses are appreciated.

48. STEP is a California Climate Investments program. Will you apply for other California Climate Investments programs in the future?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not Sure

49. Not including STEP, have you previously applied for or are you currently applying to another California Climate Investments program? (<http://www.caclimateinvestments.ca.gov/all-programs>)

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

50. If you answered "Yes" to the question above, which California Climate Investments program(s) have you applied to? (<http://www.caclimateinvestments.ca.gov/all-programs>)
-

Thank you for completing the survey. Your responses will help us to improve technical assistance service in the future and inform future funding opportunities.

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