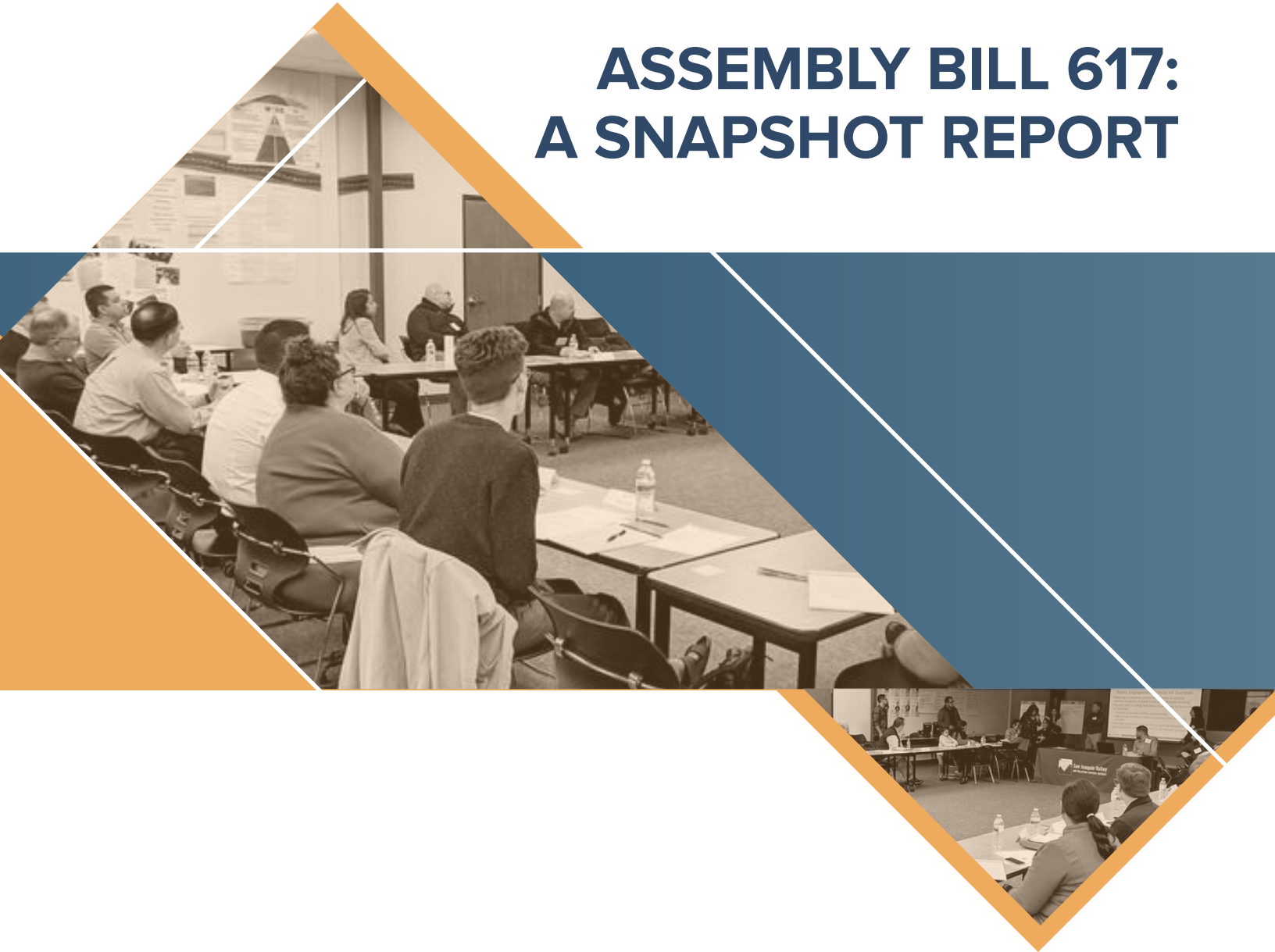


# ASSEMBLY BILL 617: A SNAPSHOT REPORT



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# INTRODUCTION

Assembly Bill (AB 617) -passed in 2017- is a bold but controversial experiment to address disparities in air quality in some of the most overburdened communities in California. It has engaged a wide range of stakeholders, from community residents and organizations, local governments, Air Districts, the California Air Resources Board (CARB), industry, and other interested parties. To date it has been implemented in 15 communities across the state and has also involved several statewide regulatory elements. AB 617 has promoted innovative approaches to air quality monitoring and management and collaboration between multiple stakeholders but has also provoked heated conflicts over how well it is achieving its goals. <sup>1</sup>

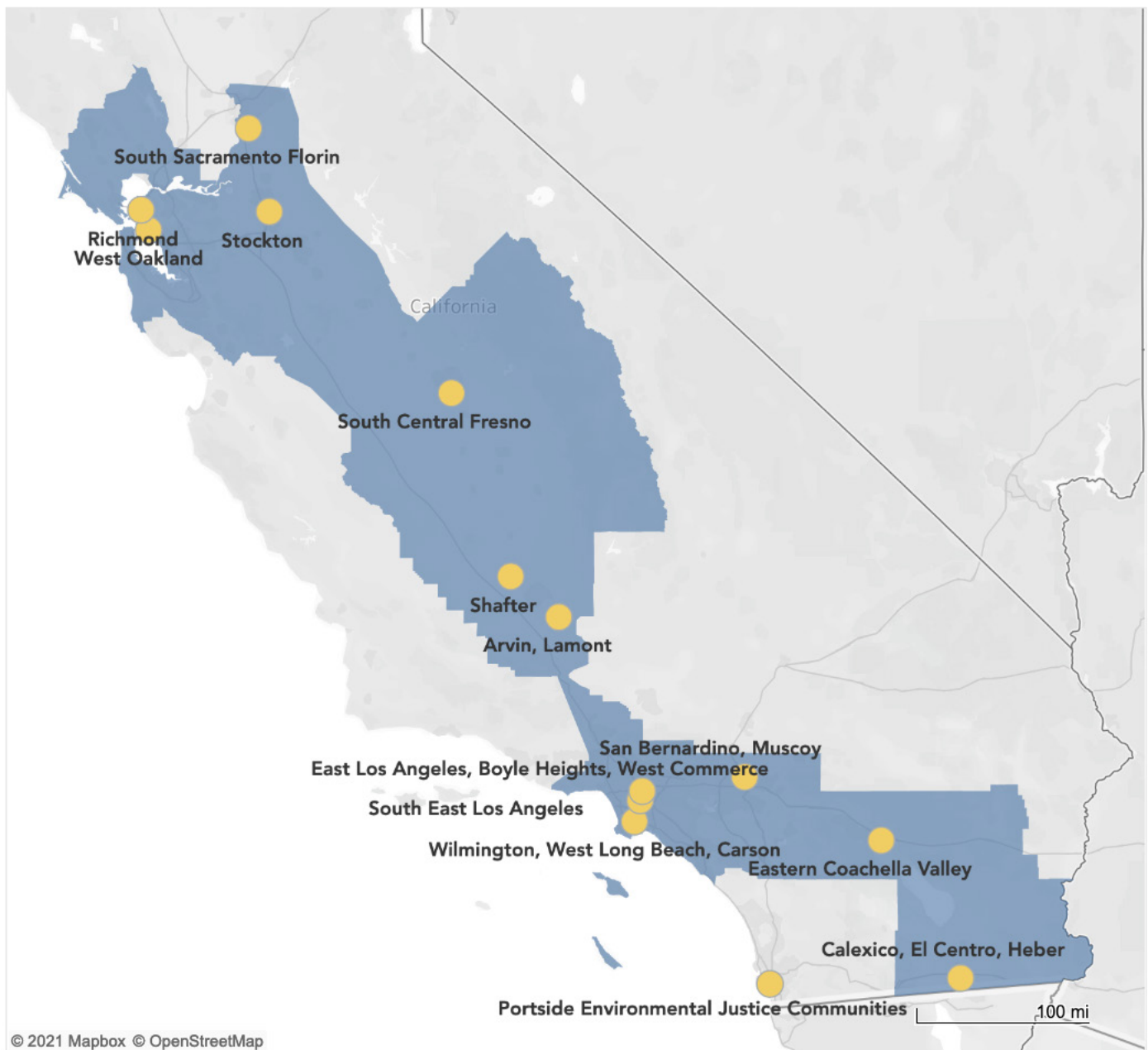


Figure 1: Communities selected for inclusion in AB 617. Source: CARB

## AB 617 ELEMENTS • Focus on Community Action



Figure 2: Source: CARB AB 617 Blueprint

This report is intended as a brief assessment (or “snapshot”) of perceptions of the implementation of AB 617 to date. However, it is not a comprehensive analysis as it is based only on a point-in-time survey of AB 617 stakeholder perceptions and does not include other methods to cross-check these perceptions with actual implementation data. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this report will surface key successes, weaknesses and lessons learned in the implementation of AB 617 as well as to raise issues and questions that should become the basis of dialogue between the multiple stakeholders engaged in the policy as well as further studies.

## METHODS

This report is based on an on-line Qualtrics survey administered to members of the Community Steering Committees (CSCs) in all 15 of the selected communities, the six Air Districts associated with these communities, other relevant state agencies, the AB 617 Consultation Group, Community Air Grant recipients, and members of the legislature. The survey was administered in August 2021. Two hundred and seventy-nine unique respondents filled out the survey including members of all 15 CSCs and the associated 6 Air District and CARB staff as well as other relevant parties. The distribution of the respondents is shown in the Appendix A. Eight of these responses were from Spanish-language surveys. To safeguard anonymity, we took out all place names from the comments and substituted a letter (e.g., “The [X] Air District”).

The survey was distributed in several ways. The Air Districts distributed the surveys to their CSCs, their district staff, and governing board members. CARB distributed the surveys to their staff, the CARB Board, the AB 617 Consultation Group (made up of leaders from the community organizations in the

CSCs, Air Districts, industry, and other relevant leaders) as well as Community Air Grant recipients. As a result, the researchers did not have direct access to the survey respondents which may have affected the response rate.

There are a number of limitations of the study. Most importantly, in some cases, the number of some categories of respondents was low so the results must be taken with a degree of caution. While the response rates from the Air Districts and CARB was quite strong (the 44 Air District, respondents across each of the engaged 6 districts and the 47 CARB respondents, encompassed the vast majority of agency staff involved in AB 617) the response rate was much lower in the CSCs. Here the total number of respondents was 109 (but with the number of respondents to each question ranging between 70-99). Based on the total number of CSC members (approximately 500 across the 15 AB 617 communities) this results in a response rate for CSCs of about 15%. While this falls within the bounds of a legitimate response rate (generally between 5%-30% for electronic surveys) it is too low to serve as a representative sample of the CSC members. This response rate also varied between CSCs. *As a result, it is important to interpret the results for CSC members as only suggestive that there are issues that warrant additional reflection by AB 617 stakeholders and future study as opposed to a representative statement of perception either in any one CSC or across the CSCs as a whole.*

To address this low sample size, we did not break out results for CSC residents and community organizations by AB 617 community and instead combined the results from all CSC members together. This does have the effect of blending the results from respondents with potentially different perspectives. However, when there are large distinctions between the results across the AB 617 communities, it suggests that there must be some important causes for these differences that should be the subject of further inquiry.

Another limitation of the study is that respondents were allowed to indicate multiple affiliations by AB 617 implementation community as well as role. While their responses were counted only once, this method did result in overlap in some categories, such as a CSC member who is also part of the AB 617 Consultation Group and a Community Air Grant recipient. As a result, we primarily focused on the results from the non-overlapping categories (Air District, CARB and CSC members).

This report focuses on the areas in which there was greatest differences in the responses as well as those that address some of more contentious issues in the AB 617 implementation process based on the authors' previous research, and therefore does not cover the majority of the questions in the survey. The full reports to the survey are linked in Appendix B.





# MAJOR FINDINGS

## COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

One of AB 617's main intentions is to have the people most affected by air pollution help shape the policies to improve these conditions. Unfortunately, on the question of AB 617's success in "placing communities in decision-making roles in developing CAMPs and/or CERPs" there is a wide disconnect between the view of Air Districts compared to most of the other participants. Some of these critical comments from stakeholders are heard in comments from the surveys.

One CSC member noted the importance of building community power to conduct agency oversight and accountability.

"Let CARB and regional air districts know that it's ok to fully empower communities, even if we get some things wrong, we can't do much worse than the status quo. The begrudging relinquishment of power is condescending and undermines trust. It would be different if the agencies were doing a great job before all of this, but they weren't, that's why 617 was necessary and that means changing things up. Designation as a 617 community isn't just an acknowledgement that resources are needed, it is also an acknowledgement that oversight and accountability are needed."

A Spanish-language CSC respondent cited the need for greater inclusivity.

*"Si se basarán en incluir a todas las comunidades los objetivos tendría un mejor propósito, habría más unidad y mayor colaboración de la comunidad"*

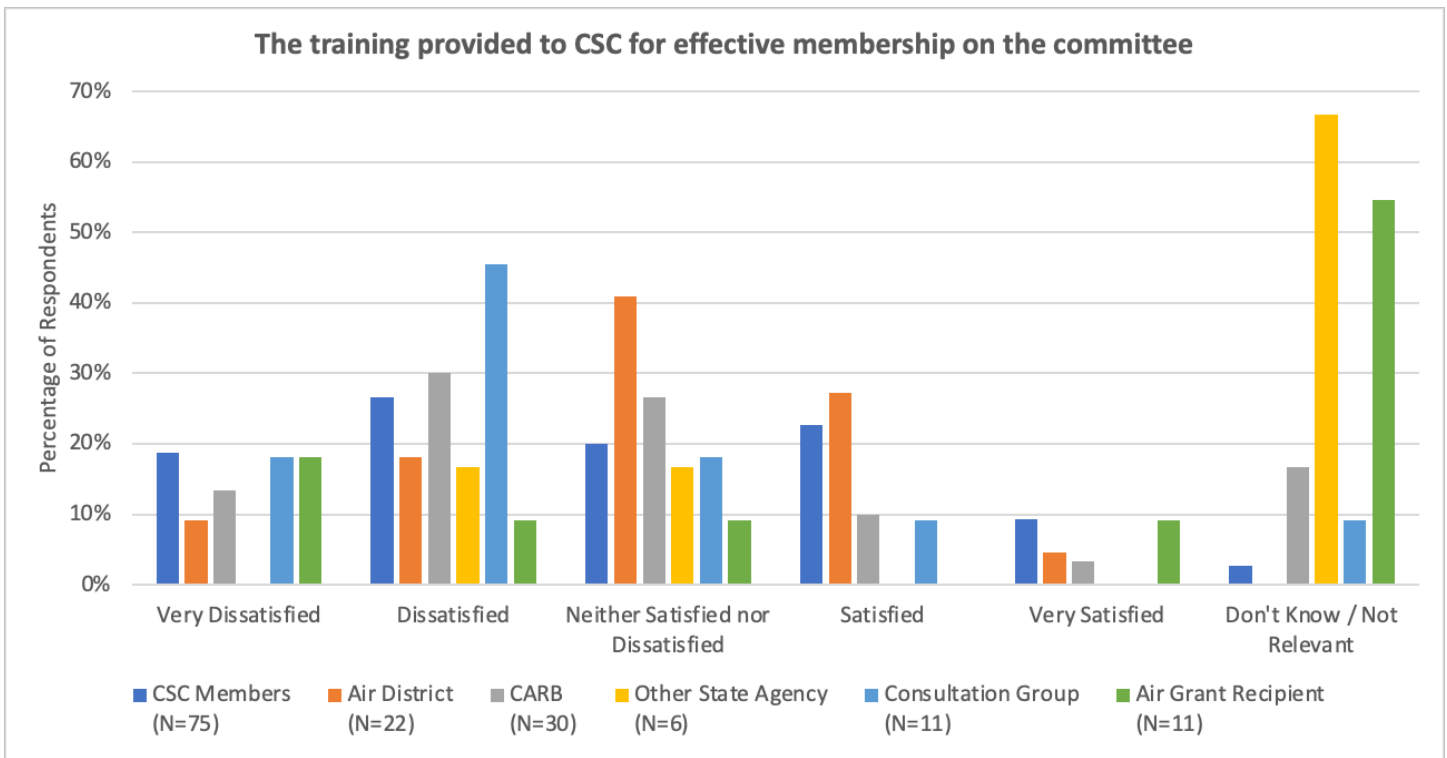
"If they were based on including all communities the objectives would have a better purpose, there would be more unity and greater collaboration of the community."

These concerns are not only held by CSC members, however. One CARB staff member also laid out the problem of what they see as undue control by their own agency as well as the Air Districts as displacing decision-making by the CSCs.

"I feel like too often the air districts or CARB try to speed the process along by making choices that should be the responsibility of community members to examine and answer, or at least too often they/we push for the community to answer in a certain way. The choices CARB and the air districts are very likely the CORRECT choices to make, even, but the point of AB 617, at least as I understand the spirit of the legislation, is to put the power to make choices into the hands of the communities themselves."

## TRAINING FOR CSC MEMBERS

Education and training for CSC members in the technical elements of air quality monitoring and management is crucial for the success of the program but is not sufficiently provided. This is illustrated in Figure 3 below which shows significant levels of dissatisfaction with the training provided to the CSC for effective membership on the committee. While there is some variation across the respondent groups, the level of those dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the training is high: with the highest being the Consultation Group (63%) followed by the CSC (46%), CARB (43%) and Air Districts (27%).



**Figure 3:** Ratings of satisfaction / dissatisfaction of “The training provided to CSC for effective membership on the committee” by stakeholder group.

One CSC respondent comment speaks to the importance and the gap of community member training. “It’s vital that community voices lead this process. It also cannot be overstated that communities have a huge learning hurdle that they need to overcome to make the informed choices they want to make to be effective leaders. It is also clear that neither the regional air districts, CARB staff nor most of the facilitation teams have adequate experience as educators. I think there are significant missed opportunities to provide communities with the literacy bump that they need to participate fully by understanding both the technical content and the political history around the issues we are addressing. I think communities deserve both better information curated by skilled educators to come up to speed on agency priorities AND an opportunity to learn from one another in the ABSENCE of the public agencies to get up to speed on the political history that has encumbered our communities with garbage air quality.”

## CROSS-AGENCY AND COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

Cross-agency collaboration is one of the key processes needed for a successful implementation of AB 617 because so many of the CERP strategies require the participation of local, regional and state entities. Unfortunately, there is a gap between categories of respondents on the question of how well AB 617 is “Helping improve collaboration between CARB, Air Districts, and communities.”

In general the public agencies have higher ratings on the issue of collaboration than the CSCs: 64% of CARB, 63% of other state agencies and 59% of Air District respondents are satisfied or very satisfied compared to only 47% of the CSC respondents. This indicates that although the majority of state and regional entities have a positive view of the progress on collaboration, this is not shared to same degree

Percentages		CSC Members (N=99)	Air District (N=31)	CARB (N=35)	Other State Agency (N=8)	Consultation Group (N=12)	Air Grant Recipient (N=12)
Placing communities in decision-making roles in developing CAMPs and/or CERPs	Very Dissatisfied	10%	0%	0%	0%	8%	0%
	Dissatisfied	13%	6%	20%	0%	17%	8%
	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	21%	16%	23%	50%	58%	50%
	Satisfied	29%	45%	29%	25%	8%	8%
	Very Satisfied	25%	29%	20%	0%	8%	17%
	Don't Know / Not Relevant	1%	3%	9%	25%	0%	17%
		↓ N=98	N = 32	N=36	N=8	N=12	N=13
Improve collaboration between CARB, Air Districts, and communities	Very Dissatisfied	9%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Dissatisfied	17%	19%	11%	0%	33%	23%
	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	24%	16%	19%	13%	17%	23%
	Satisfied	28%	34%	39%	63%	42%	38%
	Very Satisfied	19%	25%	25%	0%	8%	8%
	Don't Know / Not Relevant	2%	3%	6%	25%	0%	8%
		↓ N=96	N=29	N=35	N=8	N=12	N=13
Make progress on addressing issues of structural racism and environmental justice	Very Dissatisfied	14%	10%	0%	0%	8%	8%
	Dissatisfied	27%	7%	23%	25%	33%	23%
	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	22%	31%	40%	25%	33%	31%
	Satisfied	19%	31%	17%	25%	17%	23%
	Very Satisfied	13%	7%	9%	13%	0%	8%
	Don't Know / Not Relevant	6%	14%	11%	13%	8%	8%

Figure 4: Ratings of satisfaction / dissatisfaction of key AB 617 goals by stakeholder group.

with the community representatives. At the time, there are also roughly one quarter of Air District respondents and two thirds of the Consultation Group with this negative view while only 11% of CARB respondents are dissatisfied with progress on collaboration.

One Spanish-language respondent spoke to the problems of collaboration between the Air Districts, CARBs and other agencies.

“Provisionar las responsabilidades de las agencias locales y estatales. Las agencias explican durante el proceso de creacion de documentos pero causa confusion y uno apunta el dedo a otro de quien es responsable por regular ciertas areas o trabajo problematico a la calidad del aire en nuestra comunidad. El estado necesita aclarar sus responsabilidades sobre el distrito de como se necesita que completar el programa incorporando a la comunidad en todo el proceso.”

“Provide [clear] responsibilities for state and local agencies. The agencies explained during the document creation process, but it caused confusion, and each pointed their finger at another on who is responsible for regulating certain areas and on the problem of the air quality in our community. The state needs to clarify its responsibilities to the district as to how it needs to complete the program by involving the community throughout the process.”

## RACIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

There is divided perception across the respondent groups when it comes to ratings on addressing issues of structural racism and environmental justice. For the CSCs, 41% of members are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with only 32% satisfied or very satisfied. CARB has a similar level of satisfaction (26%) with only 23% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. The Air Districts have the most positive view with 38% satisfied or very satisfied and a similar level of dissatisfaction as CARB (17%). As in many of the questions, the Consultation Group is most negative with only 17% satisfied and 41% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.



The results of this question on environmental justice are aligned with those in Question 13: “How well does the AB 617 implementation meet the principles of environmental justice?” The positive perceptions vary across the entities: higher for Air Districts and CARB (both at 47%) viewing the alignment as well or very well compared to only 33% for CSCs and 18% for the Consultation Group members. In contrast, there is still consistently strong critical view with 39% of CSCs, 33% of Air Districts, 36% of CARB and 54% of Consultation Group members viewing the question negatively. This suggests that working on AB 617’s alignment with racial and environmental justice should be an important area of focus in the coming years.

Percentages	CSC Members (N=72)	Air District (N=21)	CARB (N=30)	Other State Agency (N=6)	Consultation Group (N=11)	Air Grant Recipient (N=11)
Not Well	15%	0%	3%	17%	18%	0%
Somewhat Well	24%	33%	33%	0%	36%	36%
Neither Well nor Not Well	24%	5%	7%	33%	18%	18%
Well	18%	33%	40%	50%	18%	36%
Very Well	15%	14%	7%	0%	0%	9%
Don't Know	4%	14%	10%	0%	9%	0%

Figure 5: Ratings of “How well does the AB 617 implementation meet the principles of environmental justice?” by stakeholder group.

One CSC member provided a historical view on the topic with some suggestions for next steps.

“Environmental Justice and Racism were only deeply discussed in the most recent AB 617 Year 3 CSC of South LA. I didn't see this level of dialogue in the Year 1 [Wilmington, Carson, West Long Beach] community and from what I've heard of the other CSC's, it seems to have not taken center stage. I'm very interested in the People's Blueprint that the AB 617 Consultation group is developing to better address structural racism and environmental justice. Training on implicit bias for all agencies and organizations involved would be very helpful too.”

One comment from a CARB respondent draws out important the importance of considering the historical processes that created environmental inequities and the problems in the public policies not adequately addressing them.

“Well, structural and environmental racism weren't trendy words when AB 617 started so it was addressed as an issue of socioeconomic [issues]. But race is what constructed the neighborhoods in which AB 617 seeks to transform. So the fact that was not acknowledged strongly from the start by CARB and air districts was a fault of the government.”

While there were very few comments from the Air Districts on environmental justice (8 total), there was one that addresses the issue in clear terms.

“Communities need more power. EJ principles require that communities be empowered and speak for themselves. Whether or not this is being achieved varies wildly between districts and between the communities.”

## CARB'S ROLE

One issue that has been raised consistently over the course of the AB 617 implementation process has been the role of CARB in the CSC meetings. There are a wide range of opinions about this, with a general interest in seeing a more pro-active stance by CARB staff.

Percentages		CSC Members (N=73)	Air District (N=20)	CARB (N=27)	Other State Agency (N=6)	Consultation Group (N=11)	Air Grant Recipient (N=11)
Being pro-active in participating in CSC meetings	Very Dissatisfied	10%	15%	4%	0%	27%	0%
	Dissatisfied	18%	15%	15%	17%	18%	18%
	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	16%	15%	15%	33%	9%	27%
	Satisfied	32%	45%	37%	0%	27%	9%
	Very Satisfied	21%	5%	15%	17%	0%	9%
	Don't Know / Not Relevant	4%	5%	15%	33%	18%	36%

Figure 6: Rating of level of satisfaction / dissatisfaction with CARB roles by stakeholder group.

As shown here, there is a similar level of negative views of CARB's pro-active role expressed by CSC, Air District and Consultation Group members (28%, 30%, 45% respectively) compared to only 19% for CARB and 17% for other state agencies. And yet, it is important to note that the roughly half of CSC, Air District and CARB members view for CARB's role positively (53%, 50% and 52% respectively are satisfied or very satisfied.) Overall, this shows that while there is some level of support of CARB's role, there is significant room for improvement.

One Air District staff person articulates a common perspective relative to the full set of responses that calls for a more-proactive role.

“Since the AB 617 program began CARB is supposed to be the lead/oversight agency; however they have taken a backseat role in development and implementation of CERP. In my experience CARB has only provided assistance or lessons learned only when prompted or asked directly to in most cases. I hope major improvement will come as the CARB staff has more experiences with this program and over time and can better help the districts and program overall.”

Many members of CSCs make similar calls for a more-pro-active role for CARB while recognizing the agency staff's positive contributions when they are active even when this may put them in awkward relationships with the Air Districts. This speaks to the challenging space for the agency as it inserts itself more deeply into local air quality management than it has in the past while balancing its role as both a neutral party and one with ultimate authority over the Air Districts.

“CARB has been great..... if they ever speak up. CARB should be able to share lessons learned across communities. Regional Air Districts are in no position to deliver that info. How did we get to a place where a CA State agency is more worried about upsetting the feelings of local air district staff and board members than they are of losing their credibility with residents?”

Finally, this call for a more pro-active role is reflected by a comment reflective of many from CARB personnel themselves, including in this comment.

“CARB has largely taken a step back and just been an observer. This observer role that CARB has taken on has led to wildly different experiences for communities and led to some districts abusing their perceived power over the AB617 process. I believe CARB needs to take a larger role in overseeing that the CSCs are being empowered to make decisions for their own community as opposed to the air districts telling them what is going to be done.”

One CARB staff member explains this challenge as based on the fact that the agency’s engagement in AB 617 as a “sea change...with huge organizational repercussions, and we lack the information infrastructure required to implement the program effectively.”

These quantitative data and comments reflect the need for CARB to further assess its roles in the AB 617 process and to develop the organizational structures, cultures, and resources needed to provide the support for the implementation needed by all parties.

## ROLE OF THE AIR DISTRICTS

The state’s Air Districts serve as the primary implementing agency for the community-scale development and implementation of the CAMPs and CERPs. And yet, because both sets of documents (especially the CERPs) require extensive collaboration between the Air Districts and the CSCs who provide basis for community participation and with other implementing governments and agencies, AB 617 is greatly expanding the kind and degree of partnerships they are engaged in. Two questions in the survey examine this collaboration. 1) *How well are the Air Districts “providing adequate opportunities for the CSC to write or shape actions in the CERP or CAMP or make decisions on how these plans are implemented?”* and 2) *How well are the Air Districts “collaborating with other relevant entities (cities, counties, county ag. commissioners, ports, etc.)?”*

On the first question of CSC decision-making at the aggregate level of all stakeholders, there is a moderate level of support for the Air District roles. Here 44% of all stakeholders are satisfied or very satisfied with the Air Districts’ roles while 34% of respondents are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. On the second question of collaboration with other relevant entities, there is a bit lower level of support with only 38% satisfied or very satisfied and 30% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

Breaking this out by stakeholder group shows large differences in perception. For example, while only 5% of Air District respondents reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their roles in supporting CSC decision-making in the CAMPs and CERPs, all of the other stakeholders had much higher disapproval rates (topping out at 29% for CSC respondents being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied). A similar pattern prevails for the question of Air Districts collaborating with other relevant entities. Here 5% of Air District respondents reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their performance compared to 36% of CSC members expressing this negative view.

Percentages		CSC Members (N=72)	Air District (N=19)	CARB (N=28)	Other State Agency (N=6)	Consultation Group (N=11)	Air Grant Recipient (N=11)
Providing adequate opportunities for the CSC to write or shape actions in the CERP or CAMP, or make decisions on how these plans are implemented	Very Dissatisfied	8%	0%	0%	0%	9%	0%
	Dissatisfied	21%	5%	25%	17%	9%	27%
	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	24%	21%	18%	0%	45%	27%
	Satisfied	22%	37%	29%	50%	18%	9%
	Very Satisfied	18%	32%	11%	17%	9%	0%
	Don't Know / Not Relevant	7%	5%	18%	17%	9%	36%
Survey Responses		↓ N=68	N = 20	N=28	N=6	N=9	N=10
Collaborating with other relevant entities (cities, counties, county ag. commissioners, ports, etc.)	Very Dissatisfied	15%	0%	4%	0%	0%	10%
	Dissatisfied	21%	5%	11%	17%	22%	10%
	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	15%	25%	18%	33%	11%	20%
	Satisfied	24%	35%	29%	33%	33%	30%
	Very Satisfied	15%	25%	21%	0%	11%	10%
	Don't Know / Not Relevant	12%	10%	18%	17%	22%	20%

Figure 7: Rating of satisfaction / dissatisfaction with Air District roles by stakeholder group

This disparity in ratings is illustrated in a number of the comments on the question of how the role of Air Districts could be improved.

One Air District representative provided a reflective statement of their diligent attempts to respond to CSC requests despite logistical limitations.

“Personally, I have seen frustration by CSC members as we continue to try and listen and to provide the information that they are requesting. Unfortunately, there are instances where the information they are requesting is not available, such as community specific health data and studies, or there are challenges in providing the information when there is such a limited amount of time provided by the legislation to complete a CERP and/or CAMP.”

One comment from a CARB respondent also praises the positive efforts of some Air Districts while calling out others with less constructive approaches to community engagement.

“There are some air districts that are wonderful at empowering and giving providing the support needed for CSCs to succeed. However, there are a few air districts that are manipulating and subjugating the CSCs into doing the air district's bidding. The air districts need to focus on empowerment and support of the CSCs and allow the CSCs to decide how the CERP or CAMP should be developed and implemented.”

Finally, two comments from some CSC members also provide a nuanced perspective. One CSC member describes the evolutionary improvements of their Air District:

“I think my air district [X] is stretched too thin. They need more resources to be effective. They have not been able to follow-up on all the community members' concerns. They seem to be doing much better with incorporating the community in a participatory environment in the Year 3 compared to the Year 1 community, so there's hope that they are evolving.”

Another comment lays out their vision for CSC-centered decision-making, “Air Districts need to empower the CSC to build these plans and make all decisions regarding them, then watchdog implementation.”

## **ROLE OF INDUSTRY**

One issue that has attracted a great deal of controversy has been the role of industry on the CSCs and in the implementation of AB 617 as a whole. There is a split in perception between those who see industry as part of the community and therefore a legitimate and important part of the CSCs and those who wish to limit industry influence arguing that it is a conflict of interest to have the regulated sector involved in developing regulations. This division is heard in the following comments.

One CSC member represents comments from many in the survey that critique the role of industry.

"Consulting" industry should never have been interpreted to mean that industry representatives should get to "vote on their own Monitoring or Emissions Reductions. Industry reps can make their case in the final 90 seconds to 5 minutes of the meetings like the general public.

This sentiment is reflected by a comment from a non-CARB state agency representative.

“Industry should have a seat at the table but no power to influence the CSC's decisions (they have enough power already).”

In contrast, there are a number of comments from industry representatives who call for greater engagement of industry in the CSCs.

One industry respondent observed:

“In the [X CSC] there are only two non-voting business members. I believe Business and Industry are part of the community and should have a vote even it is a small part of the committee.”

Another industry respondent echoed this perception:

“The [X District] like all regulatory bodies needs to be user friendly to industry. We are all in this together. Once the [X District] eliminates all industry what will happen to millions of Californians in socially disadvantaged situations?”

Yet another industry CSC member makes a more nuanced point, not about industry’s CSC engagement but on the potential impact of the CERPs on small businesses in contrast to the large corporate actors.

“One question I have is how do we support so many family run small businesses unable to comply with policy decisions that only well-heeled large companies can take on? The last thing I want to see is the further consolidation of industries and businesses by the multi nationals.”

It is clear that further dialogue about the role of industry will be needed by all parties in the AB 617 process. This is a major topic addressed in the review draft of the People’s Blueprint, developed by a “writers’ group” of community organization representatives from the AB 617 Consultation Group. Public dialogue about the review draft and the development of the final version will ideally provide a forum for this consideration of the role of industry.

## **ASSESSMENT OF THE COMMUNITY AIR MONITORING PLANS (CAMPS)**

There is a range of ratings of satisfaction between stakeholder groups on the Community Air Monitoring Plans (CAMPs) developed under AB 617. A full 55% of Air District respondents are either satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of their CAMPs. This compares with only 41% of CSC members. Conversely, not one Air District respondent was dissatisfied or very dissatisfied compared to 17% for CSC respondents. As noted in the limitations section, the relatively low response rate for the CSCs means that these data need to be taken as raising important questions as opposed to presenting a representative description of CSC perceptions.

There was some convergence between CSCs and Air Districts in their concern over the timing and ability of CAMPs to inform the CERPs, as this illustrative quote from an Air District respondent states.

“The timing of a CAMP and CERP community lends itself to be a "cart before the horse" scenario. How can the CAMP inform the CERP if they're developed and deployed in tandem?”

This was echoed by two CSC member comments about how some Air Districts predetermined locations, sources, and monitoring targets.

“Air monitoring data should be used in order to direct the needs/wants of the CSC. In one of my locations, an assumption was predetermined as to what is causing the pollution to the community and decisions/money allocated based on these assumptions BEFORE air monitoring had been completed. Shouldn't monitoring be done FIRST in order to determine what the culprits are?”

“The [X] District has already contracted with two companies [A and B] to conduct Community Air Quality Monitoring in our Pilot Project Communities without our approval, without our participation in determining which companies we might want to use, what type of AQ monitoring equipment we would like to use, what chemicals we want to monitor, what type of data we want to collect and what type of reports we would like to have.”



In addition to this “cart before the horse” issue, CSC members have a variety of other concerns. Some of these comments focused on the problems of Air Districts making use of the significant data available from community-run low-cost monitoring systems as seen in one CSC member comment.

“Not all regional air districts are supportive of the recommended low cost remote sensor networks. They fail to appreciate the engagement and communications potential. Some of us objected to our CAMPs and begged to modify them only to be told that CSC approval doesn't apply to the CAMP only the CERP. We had to beg to have our Community Air Grant projects acknowledged.”

## COMMUNITY EMISSIONS REDUCTION PROGRAMS (CERPS)

The Community Emissions Reduction Programs (CERPs) are the heart of the AB 617 implementation strategy to improve air quality in the designed communities and as such are a key indicator of success. At the scale of all stakeholders, there is mixed support the CERPs “*potential to substantially reduce air pollution and exposures and protect health in disadvantaged communities.*” As in many of the other indicators, CSCs had the most negative view with 17% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied and only 39% satisfied or very satisfied. This compares to the much more positive view of CARB (6% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied and 47% satisfied or very satisfied) and the Air Districts with only 2% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied and 53% satisfied or very satisfied.

Survey respondents’ comments about how to improve the CERPs (from Question 12) from across the stakeholder group illustrate this range of assessments.

Two comments, one from an Air District respondent and one from a CSC member, indicate a clear conflict in perspectives. While the Air District staff member calls for “more focus on emissions reduction effort rather than exposure reduction enforceability/ implementation of things that are not within air quality agency jurisdiction” the CSC member calls for the opposite:

“Exposure reduction and economic opportunity creation are equally valid strategies to emission reductions. Public health IS a value of AB 617. Some regional air district staff need to learn that.”

This difference of definition of what the law requires and what the Air District’s responsibilities should be helps explain some of the conflicts between these two sets of stakeholders.

While many CSC comments include as push for the CERPs to address land use, some Air District respondents express concern about their capacity to do so. For example, one Air District respondent call for changes to help their agencies avoid being caught in a contradiction between stakeholder demand and their perceived capacity to meet it.

“Provide air districts with land use jurisdiction or limit the scope of AB 617 to only focus on air quality issues that air districts have land use jurisdiction over.”

Another issue identified with the CERPs are the accountability mechanisms to implement them. Two comments about how to improve the CERPs – one from a CARB respondent and one from a CSC member echo each other in this regard.

The CARB respondent recommended: “Find a way to make CERPs more targeted, aggressive, trackable, and feasible.”

A CSC respondent echoed the sentiment about making the CERPs more results oriented.

“The specific CERP that has been developed for [X community] is not measurable in terms of success and it does not have very many realistically implementable measures due to severe

funding limitations associated with specific CERP measures. While there was great community involvement in the development of the CERP, it is less clear on how environmental justice measures issues can be significantly addressed if many of the CERP measures are not provided with more funding.”

## **PROBLEMS OF THE ORIGINAL LEGISLATION**

While there is appreciation for the role of the legislature in creating AB 617, there is great concern across all stakeholders about two elements of the law: its timeline and the match between its requirements and the available funding.

One aspect nearly all stakeholders agree on is the problem of the very short timeline required by the AB 617 legislation to implement the program, including the development of the CAMPs and CERPs. Across all of the respondents nearly half (47%) were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied by the “appropriateness of its required implementation timelines” compared to only 21% who were satisfied or very satisfied. Similarly, 44% of all respondents were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with how well the legislature provide sufficient financial resources to implement the policy while only 35% were satisfied or very satisfied.

One Air District representative noted the hard position the legislation places them in relative to the demands of the CSC.

“The limited timeframes for the development and implementation of the CERPs and CAMP will be an ongoing challenge and source of frustration for CSC members making them feel like the air districts are not listening to them or are unwilling to provide what they are asking for. However, it is understandable that there are established timelines for this work to be completed as the communities that are being focused on have an immediate need in reducing the levels of air pollution and their exposure to air pollution.”

As noted in above sections, this problem of timing also played out in the difficulty for the CAMP data to play a substantive role in guiding the priorities and strategies in the CERPs.

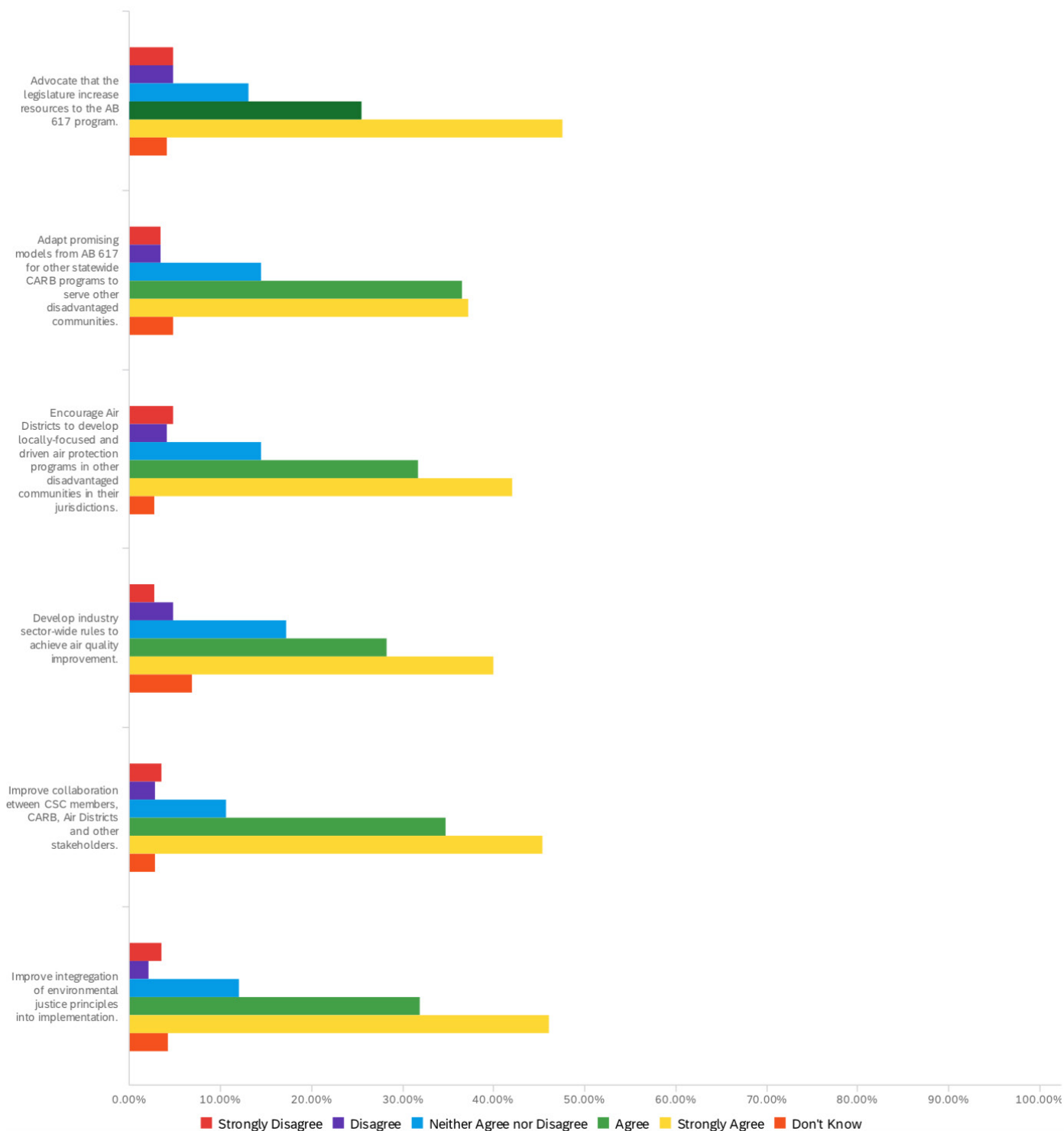
## **FUTURE STEPS**

There is a great degree of agreement across all stakeholders on the kinds of future steps needed to improve the implementation of AB 617. This is shown in responses to Question 14 that asks respondents to indicate their level of agreement with a range of options. As shown in the Figure 11 below, the vast majority of respondents agree or strongly agree with all of the options.

Respondents’ comments provide some more nuance on these ideas from the different stakeholder categories.

One CSC member lays out recommendations that focus on direct benefits to disadvantaged populations through new Air District actions over and above their existing efforts.

“We need direct pollution reductions, through controls and zoning changes, enforcement of existing rules, and direct benefits for low income households like money for weatherization, electrification, etc. Direct reductions and benefits would get us a lot closer to our goals than long term plans that rely on existing programs that hand out incentive dollars to corporate polluters who should pay their own way or phase out.”



n=145 responses

**Figure 8:** Level of agreement / disagreement with these “opportunities for CSC members, CARB, Air Districts and other stakeholders to improve implementation of AB 617” across all stakeholders.

Another CSC member focuses on the need for improved education, group process and attention to social structural problems.

“AB617 needs more focus on the various training needs for all participants including CARB, the air districts, industries, and the community members i.e., Implicit bias, antiracism, racial microaggressions, racialized mistreatment, describing how uncomfortability about discussing race getting passed down through education systems, redlining, air pollution science, monitoring technology, emission reduction technology, types and applicability of various types of health studies, etc.”

As noted above, funding is a major issue, as is cross-agency collaboration. This is heard from one Air District representative.

“The law needs more resources, funding to make a difference. Also, it needs the help of other local elected officials and agencies since much of what the CSCs want does not fall under [Air District] jurisdiction (such as zoning issues... mobile sources, etc.)”

This focus on funding and agency collaboration is echoed by a CARB respondent.

“Bringing in collaboration with councils of governments is essential. No community would be in this place if there were better land use and other policies. From an EPA/CARB/Legislature perspective, this is a good opportunity to engage local decision-makers on broader more comprehensive changes that get to the root problems many of the AB617 communities share.”

Yet another CARB respondent makes a similar point about collaboration.

“[I]n particular I think improving the level of collaboration between CARB, air districts, and community members should take top billing, as well as fully integrating EJ principles. Too often the core goal of EJ-driven action is forgotten for AB 617, as we disappear into the weeds.”

Another CARB respondent speaks to the need for a sustainable approach to AB 617 implementation.

“Need to find a more sustainable model for AB 617 implementation. AB 617 is not going to fix all the air quality issues. We should start seeing the program as the catalyst, the training, the practice towards making all agencies involved do their government operations in more equitable and just ways. AB 617 learnings should be filtering into all policy work.”

This issue of the longer-term implementation is reflected in yet another CARB respondent.

“Long term of course the results of AB 617 must be adapted to other communities in need, that has always been the implied -- if not outright stated -- goal of the program. But the program is still going through intense growing pains, which will continue to be messy and contentious, and widening the scope too early I think will really impact the ability to further refine and improve the process.”

A respondent from another state agency also speaks to the issue of coordination from a learning perspective.

“Provide a central hub for communities to be able to share what they've learned so that each community doesn't have to reinvent the wheel. Increase community education on the relationship between air pollution and health and incorporate health considerations in the CERP.”

Finally, another state agency representative offers an idea, reflected in comments from a number of other respondents from multiple categories, about one way to greatly expand the impact of AB 617 beyond the community-specific strategies to date.

“Developing industry sector-wide rules will enable more direct emissions reductions, which will benefit other communities as well. Trying to improve air quality one community at a time will take too long, so I like the idea of expanding the reach of AB 617 whenever possible.”

# CONCLUSION

There are a number of implications to be drawn from the data presented above. Before laying these out however, it is important to restate that the low response rates from the CSCs means that these data must not be considered representative of the CSCs as a whole and instead should be used to raise questions to be considered by AB 617 stakeholders and serve as the basis for future research.

1. The significantly lower scores for Community Steering Committee (CSC) members for the majority of the questions compared to Air Districts and CARB indicate that more dialogue to learn about and ultimately, resolve CSC members' concerns is necessary.
2. The data on CARB's performance indicate that a more pro-active approach is needed (despite some recent progress), including better support for CSCs in cases when the Air Districts are not respecting CSC voices and decision-making.
3. Similarly, the scores and comments about Air District performance indicate that providing for greater decision-making roles for CSCs is a critical improvement to meet the goals of the legislation and the AB 617 Blueprint.
4. There are concerns – especially among CSCs—about the alignment of CAMPs with community priorities for what, where, and how to monitor air pollutants. Therefore, the structure and the application of the air quality monitoring in AB 617 are important areas for further dialogue.
5. The wide variation in ratings on satisfaction with the CERPs across the communities indicate that greater attention to developing strategies that are aligned with community priorities, that provide additional value beyond existing Air District activities and that are more directly tied to reducing exposure and improving public health.
6. The consistent call across all stakeholders for improved technically-oriented training for CSC members and environmental justice and community participation for Air Districts and CARB support a comprehensive education strategy for implementing parties.
7. There is wide-spread agreement across all categories of respondents about the problems of short timeline to successfully carry out the legislation.
8. There is mixed support for obtaining additional financial resources to implement the policy as opposed to making better use of existing resources.
9. Working with the legislature and the Governor's Office will be an important element of enhancing AB 617 (and possibly other follow-up bills) in the future.

This Snapshot report has provided some high-level perspectives on the successes, challenges and lessons learned from the first three years of AB 617's implementation and hopefully has set the stage for productive dialogue and further research on how to help all stakeholders collaborate to improve its performance in the future.





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## DISCLAIMERS

The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not represent the official position or policy of the State of California, the California Environmental Protection Agency, or the California Air Resources Board. The mention of trade names, products, and organizations does

not constitute endorsement or recommendation for use.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For recent reports on AB 617 see: London, Jonathan; Peter Nguyen, Mia Dawson, and Katrina Manrique (2020). *Community Engagement in AB 617: An Evaluation of Challenges, Successes, Lessons Learned and Recommendations for the Future*. University of California, Davis.

<https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/sites/default/files/2020-10/17RD035%20-%20English%20-%20AB%20617%20UC%20Davis%20Report%20Final%20for%20distribution.pdf>; California Environmental Justice Alliance (2021) *Lessons From California's Community Emissions Reduction Plans: AB 617's Flawed Implementation Must Not Be Repeated*: [https://caleja.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CEJA\\_AB617\\_r4-2.pdf](https://caleja.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CEJA_AB617_r4-2.pdf). See also Ryan, Benjamin (2020) *This California Law Offers Biden a Tool in the Fight for Environmental Justice*. *The Nation*. December 20, 2020. <https://www.thenation.com/article/environment/ab617-environment-california-epa/>.

## APPENDIX A

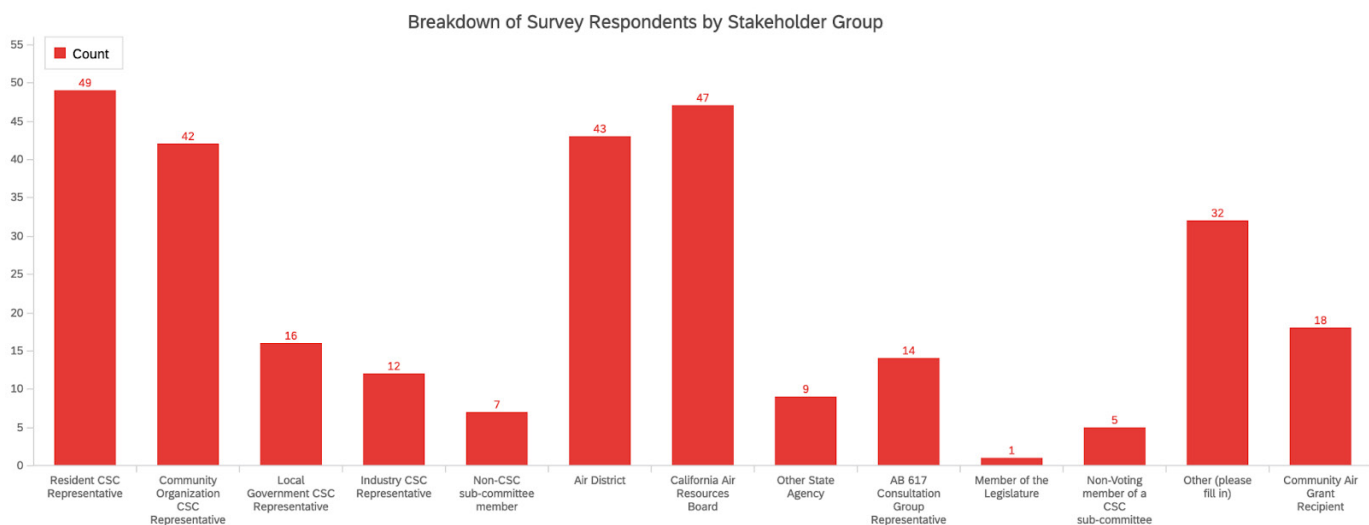


Figure i. Breakdown of Survey Respondents by Stakeholder Group

## APPENDIX B

Please find the links to the full survey reports for both the English and Spanish versions below:  
1) [Link to Full English Survey Report](#), 2) [Link to Full Spanish Survey Report](#)