Appendix E Environmental Justice and Disadvantaged Communities

The City is home to populations with sociodemographic characteristics that may have a higher vulnerability to climate impacts. These groups may be concentrated in key areas of the City and have the potential to overlap with key climate related hazards that place these populations at a disproportionate higher risk from climate impacts. In general, low-income residents, communities of color, tribal nations, and immigrant communities have disproportionately experienced some of the greatest environmental burdens and related health problems throughout the history of the U.S. and in California.

These historic inequities are, in the majority of cases, not a coincidence but a result of inappropriate zoning and negligent land use planning, intersecting structural inequalities, failure to enforce proper zoning or conduct regular inspections, deed restrictions and other discriminatory housing and lending practices, limited political and economic power among certain demographics, the prioritization of business interests over public health, development patterns that tend to concentrate pollution and environmental hazards in certain communities, and the placement of economic and environmental benefits in areas outside of disadvantaged communities (California Environmental Justice Alliance 2017).

Based on the State's definition of disadvantaged communities, no census tracts within the San Luis Obispo region are designated as disadvantaged communities. However, the San Luis Obispo Council of Governments (SLOCOG) has created a regional definition of disadvantaged communities to help distribute funds more equitably, and meet the state and federal environmental justice requirements. In the San Luis Obispo Region, disadvantaged communities are defined as disproportionately burdened areas that are economically distressed and/or historically underrepresented as a part of the local government process. The Disadvantaged Communities Assessment identifies 13 variables that address a wide range of socioeconomic and population-based factors to geographically define these disproportionately-burdened areas. The 13 variables are:

1. Racial Minority
2. Ethnic Minority
3. Disability Status
4. Household Income
5. Free or Reduced-Price Meals
6. Educational Attainment
7. Language Proficiency
8. Renter Affordability
9. Housing Ownership Affordability
10. Older Adults: Age 75 Years and Older
11. Youth: Age 15 Years and Under
12. Households with No Vehicle Available
13. Households with No Computing Device Available

SLOCOG completed analysis at the traffic analysis zone (TAZ) level using these variables and evaluated relative to state and county averages. Points were assigned accordingly for each variable, and a composite score was derived for each TAZ in the region. The top quintile (top 20 percent) of TAZs were considered meeting the regional definition of disadvantaged communities. Individuals or households that include one or more of these variables are considered more vulnerable to natural and manmade hazards as well as the local impacts of climate change.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE SURVEY RESULTS

In preparation for development of the Community Safety and Resilience Element, an Environmental Justice Survey for community organizations was conducted to gather input on environmental topics from organizations that serve vulnerable and/or disadvantaged communities in the city. The survey gathered input on how the city can better support disadvantaged communities by reducing environmental pollution, identifying key community needs, and increasing the voice of marginalized groups in the City's decision-making process. Highlights from the survey are included below and have been integrated into the environmental justice goals, policies, in programs in this element. The full survey results can be found in Appendix D.

The survey was sent via email to 59 staff members at local organizations or agencies that work with disadvantaged communities or focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. The survey received seven responses from community organizations that serve populations that live, work, and/or go to school in the city and in San Luis Obispo County.

Survey respondents noted the following types of environmental pollutants adversely impacting vulnerable populations:

1. Exhaust and traffic pollution from living in proximity to major roadways
2. Contaminated drinking water
3. Lead paint or pipes in housing
4. Pesticide pollution from agriculture
5. Living/working near environmental clean-up sites
6. Smoke from wildfires

Survey respondents included the following recommendations for how the City can help protect vulnerable populations from environmental pollutants, hazards and climate change impacts:

7. Host listening sessions inside of affected communities
8. Devote new human and material resources to investigate and remedy environmental injustices
9. Identify and appoint leadership from within the affected communities
10. Provide monetary or other basic needs support to farmworkers when their work is disrupted by unusual or dramatic climate events
11. Incorporate greater city plans to clean up pollutants and test for pollutants in soil and other locations

12. Provide access to resources, education, funding, and create platforms or events where community members may share their experiences and be intentionally listened to

Community Resilience and Social Infrastructure

Adaptive capacity is defined as the ability of systems, institutions, humans, and other organisms to adjust to potential damage, to take advantage of opportunities, or to respond to consequences (IPCC 2014). Alongside the steps the City and partner agencies have already taken to protect the City from existing climate-related hazards and increase its adaptive capacity, it is important to recognize the role community organizations and informal social networks can play in building adaptive capacity to the impacts of climate change.

Social cohesion, generally understood as the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups in society or community, is one of the strongest indicators of resilience during disaster events as well as in post-disaster recovery efforts (Townshend et al. 2015). Social cohesion can play an important role in helping protect residents, particularly vulnerable populations, during climate-related disasters.

Important indicators of social cohesion identified in this research include:

1. Belonging versus isolation, which means shared values, identity, feelings of commitment;
2. Inclusion versus exclusion, which concerns equal opportunities of access;
3. Participation versus non-involvement;
4. Recognition versus rejection, which addresses the issue of respecting and tolerating differences in a pluralist society; and,
5. Legitimacy versus illegitimacy (Jenson 1998).

An important component in remaining resilient to the impacts of climate change and climate-related disasters is the post-disaster recovery period. As noted in research on the topic, a focus not only of the physical rehabilitation of the built environment but on addressing the emotional and mental health impacts of disasters is needed to ensure a successful community recovery during the post-disaster period. The emotional and mental health impacts of disasters can be addressed through various types of social cohesion including social and support networks (including access to social support in times of need), social participation (as the obverse of social isolation and being cut off from relationships providing friendship and company), and community engagement (including volunteering which draws people together to work for the benefit of others) (Townshend et al. 2015). While measuring the degree of social cohesion present in the city is not possible at this point, this subject is discussed here to emphasize the importance of social cohesion in increasing community resilience to the impacts of the climate change. Social cohesion here is highlighted as important component of community-based adaptative capacity and is discussed, as appropriate, in the discussions on specific climate-related hazards.

COMMUNITY ASSETS SURVEY RESULTS

In preparation for development of the Community Safety and Resilience Element, and Community Assets Survey was conducted to gather input from the general public about social cohesion, community strengths, and disaster preparedness. Survey respondents were asked which community assets and resources were most important to them under four different scenarios: Normal Life, Disaster Preparation, During a Disaster Event, and during Post Disaster recovery. The survey was open from August 12 through August 30, 2021. There were 266 responses to the survey. Highlights from the survey are included below and have been integrated into the goals, polices, in programs in this element. The full survey results can be found in Appendix D.

Community Strengths: Across all four scenarios, these assets were frequently mentioned:

1. Public Information (Disaster Information, Social Media, News)
    a. 47 mentions accounting for 20% of responses
2. Medical/Emergency Services (Public Safety)
    a. 41 mentions accounting for 17% of responses
3. Open Space/Trails
    a. 31 mentions accounting for 13% of responses

Respondents listed receiving the following benefits from the assets listed above:

Public Information: (Disaster Information, Social Media, News)

6. Access to accurate and understandable information
7. Informs about the current state of situation
8. Enhances ability to prepare and mobilize
9. Provides direction and recommendation
10. Connects community members to resources

Medical/Emergency Services:

11. Vaccines, injuries, aid
12. Provides reassurance and “peace of mind” when services are well staffed, present, and equipped

Open Space/Trails:

13. Improves mental and physical health
14. Outlet for activity or relaxation
15. Overall fitness and wellbeing are supported