

# A Call to Action

Charting a New Course Toward Environmental Justice  
at the Bay Area Air Quality Management District



*From the Community Advisory  
Council of the Bay Area Air  
Quality Management District*

November 2024

# Executive Summary



*A Call to Action* summarizes the Community Advisory Council's vision and recommendation to advance nine Environmental Justice Priorities and related actions at the Air District.

The Community Advisory Council was established by the Board of Directors in November 2021, representing different environmental justice communities throughout the Bay Area. This group of community leaders and environmental justice advocates assists the Board in developing Air District initiatives that benefit the community and advance environmental justice, while prioritizing engagement and partnership. The Community Advisory Council is a standing advisory council of the Air District that uses environmental justice principles to provide guidance to the Board of Directors and the Executive Officer/Air Pollution Control Officer on programs and policies that impact overburdened communities within the Air District's jurisdiction to ensure the fair treatment of all persons living in those communities. The Community Advisory Council and the Community Advisory Council's Environmental Justice Policy Ad Hoc Committee served as formal advisors to the [Air District's 2024 – 2029 Strategic Plan](#).

## The Challenge

For 70 years, the Air District has been responsible for ensuring that people living in the Bay Area breathe clean air. Although regional air quality has significantly improved, not all communities have benefited equitably. These impacted communities are most often lower-income communities of color. Often these communities have endured decades of exclusionary and discriminatory government policies and practices. These injustices have resulted in communities that experience the effects of environmental racism, including lower air quality, contributing to poorer health outcomes and associated lower life expectancy, and a lower quality of life overall. In response to these challenges, the Air District Board of Directors created the Community Advisory Council to advise on issues affecting these impacted communities and to ensure that their voices are heard in the decision-making process.



# The Call to Action

Since January 2022, the Community Advisory Council has advised the Air District about how it must build trust with communities to better understand community concerns. From December 2022 to December 2024, the Environmental Justice Policy Ad Hoc Committee has worked with staff, executive leadership, and the Board of Directors to prioritize solutions to achieve environmental justice.

The Community Advisory Council identified nine Environmental Justice Priorities that are intended to guide the agency in better advancing and addressing environmental justice across all aspects of the Air District's operations. These priorities outline the conditions necessary for the Air District to be an effective partner with frontline environmental justice communities, aiming to improve air quality and overall community health and well-being. By focusing on these priorities, the Air District seeks to embed environmental justice in its operations and decision-making processes, ultimately benefiting the communities most affected by environmental disparities.

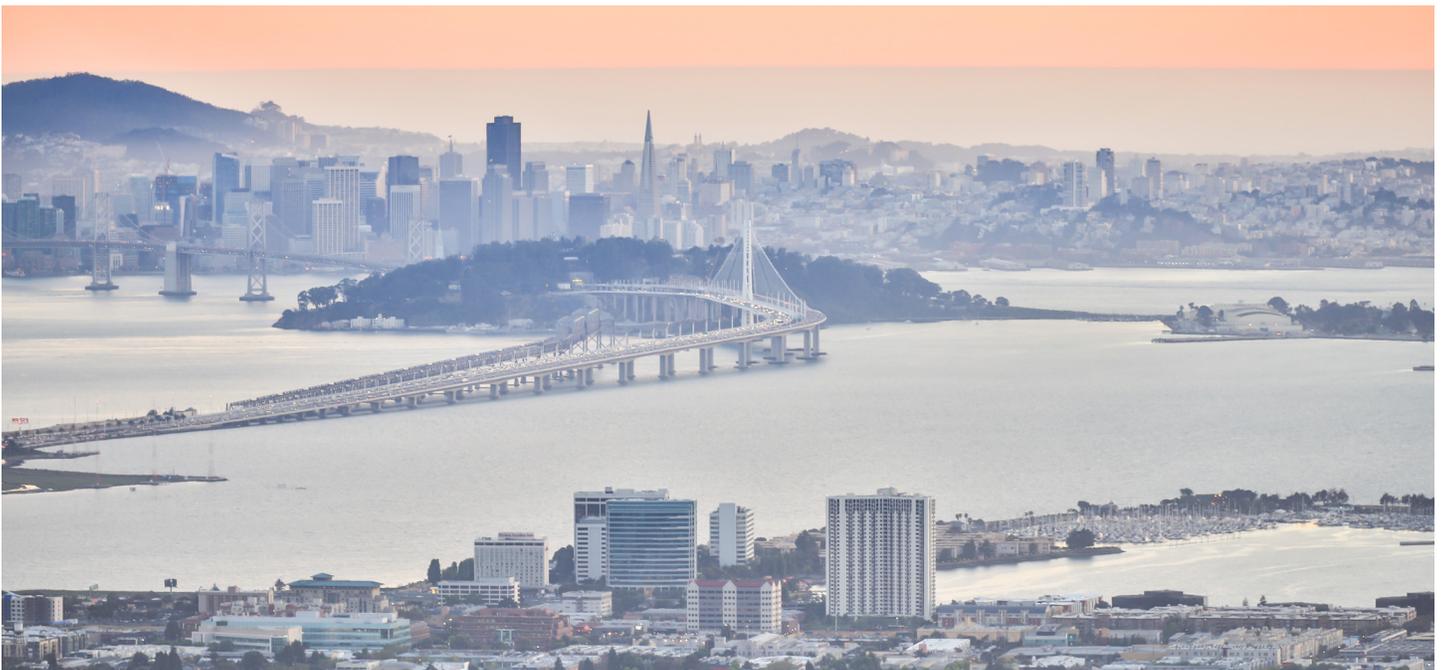
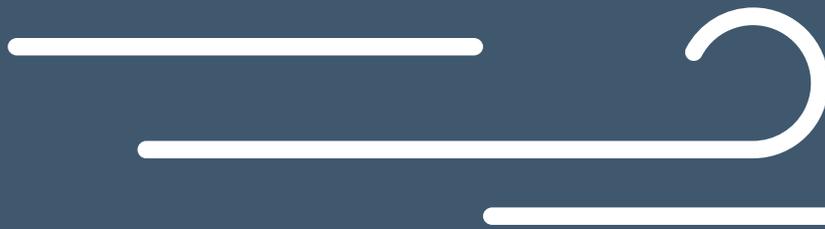


## The Community Advisory Council's Environmental Justice Priorities

1. Advance Environmental Justice
2. Provide Meaningful Agency Support to Advance Environmental Justice
3. Integrate Environmental Justice Considerations in Core Functions
4. Implement Environmental Justice Best Practices and Innovation
5. Communicate with Clarity, Transparency, and Integrity
6. Grow Capacity of Air District Staff and Board Members to Integrate Environmental Justice
7. Grow Capacity of Environmental Justice Communities and Organizations
8. Seek Appropriate Legal Remedies and Coordinate with Environmental Justice Communities
9. Provide Technical Assistance to Local Governments



# At a Glance: The Air District's Environmental Justice Commitments



# A Vision for Change: One Air District Working Toward Environmental Justice

For nearly 70 years, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District has been responsible for ensuring that people living in the Bay Area breathe clean air. Although regional air quality has significantly improved, not everyone has benefited equitably. Communities located near freeways, busy roads, and industrial facilities continue to be exposed to higher levels of air pollution than most communities located further away from these sources. Impacted communities are most often lower-income communities of color. This is no accident. Often these communities have endured decades of exclusionary and discriminatory government policies and practices. These injustices have resulted in communities that experience the effects of environmental racism including lower air quality, poorer health outcomes, associated lower life expectancy, and a lower quality of life overall. Many environmental justice communities also face inequities related to the impacts of climate change.<sup>2</sup>

The Air District staff engaged in an extended series of conversations with the Community Advisory Council and its Environmental Justice Policy Ad Hoc Committee members to better understand air quality from their perspectives as community members. Recognizing that communities are not monolithic, the Air District engaged in deep listening as members recounted the persistence of harms from the past and the accumulation of new harms afflicting their communities. These conversations required time and were sometimes uncomfortable, but they were necessary for building trust and dialogue so that a new vision for how the Air District could manage air quality could emerge.

This new vision increases the Air District's focus on place-based solutions to manage air quality more effectively in impacted communities. This vision also broadens the Air District's perspectives about how it can drive positive change by leveraging its existing rules, regulations, and statutory authorities. Advancing environmental justice requires systemic change that takes into consideration the many environmental, economic, and social factors affecting communities. Systemic change requires continuous, two-way communication with impacted communities and solutions that address root causes of inequity. As a result, the Air District's vision requires interdisciplinary, intersectional, and innovative approaches.

Investment and agreement in this vision will lead to greater capacity for all stakeholders—the Air District, local governments, community-based organizations, and community members—to advance environmental justice.

*“One of the main benefits of this process is the extended and regular engagement with key leadership at the Air District. It has created an opportunity for us to learn about the institutional culture and how to go about the change we seek. It has forced them to hear a few things. They are starting to see that we are all humans, that we have a lot more in common than we have not in common.”*

—John Kevin Jefferson III

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see:

- Rothstein, R. (2018). *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. Liveright Publishing Corporation.
- United States Environmental Protection Agency. (2024). "Environmental Justice Research at the EPA." Retrieved from: [www.epa.gov/ej-research](http://www.epa.gov/ej-research).

# Air District Response to the Call to Action

A key role of the Community Advisory Council is to provide advice to the Air District and Board of Directors on programs and policies that impact all communities, including overburdened communities, within the Air District's jurisdiction. The nine Environmental Justice Priorities developed by the Air District's Community Advisory Council help to inform and provide advice to the agency and its staff about how it can advance and address environmental justice within all aspects of the agency's operations. The Community Advisory Council's Environmental Justice Policy Ad Hoc Committee also identified three focus areas for near-term and sustained actions to advance environmental justice: data collection and usage, permitting, and compliance and enforcement.<sup>3</sup> These three priority areas are highlighted in the following chapter.

The Air District is committed to addressing the Community Advisory Council's Environmental Justice Priorities through its **2024 – 2029 Strategic Plan**. This Strategic Plan represents a significant evolution of the agency's mission and vision from a focus on improving regional air quality to a targeted approach that recognizes and addresses environmental inequities in air quality at the local level.

With input from the Community Advisory Council's Environmental Justice Policy Ad Hoc Committee, the Air District will develop measurable implementation plans for activities related to advancing environmental justice.

Big picture, there are six major areas where communities can expect to see changes at the Air District to advance environmental justice:

- **Localize Air Quality Approach:** Changing the Air District's primary approach to air quality from a regional focus to using more local information and analyses that support targeted environmental justice outcomes
- **Prioritize Environmental Justice Communities for Equity:** Prioritization of environmental justice communities (e.g., through community benefits funds, penalty policy, cumulative health analyses, prioritization of permitting reviews in environmental justice communities, etc.)
- **Engage Environmental Justice Communities:** Engaging communities in more meaningful communications and partnerships. This includes community science (e.g., community monitoring and data collection) and public participation (e.g., regular community forums and new community feedback mechanisms) that recognizes communities' existing expertise, strengths, and assets
- **Respond Quickly to Air Quality Complaints and Incidents:** Better response to air quality complaints and incidents with improved coordination, communication, and local data usage
- **Strengthen Enforcement Response:** Stronger enforcement (e.g., deterrence-based penalties, community-focused injunctive relief, and consideration of repeat violations in determining enforcement response)
- **Improve Continuously and Collaboratively:** Continuous improvement on advancing equity and environmental justice actions via collaboration with, and input from, the Community Advisory Council and environmental justice communities

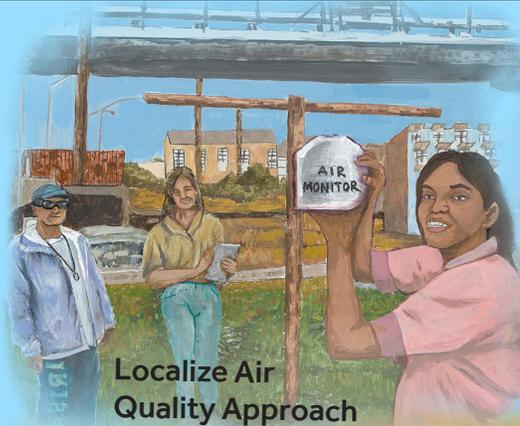
These areas of change are represented in the illustration that follows.

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on the Environmental Justice Action Planning Process and these three near-term implementation focus areas, see [Appendix C](#).



**BAY AREA  
AIR QUALITY  
MANAGEMENT  
DISTRICT**

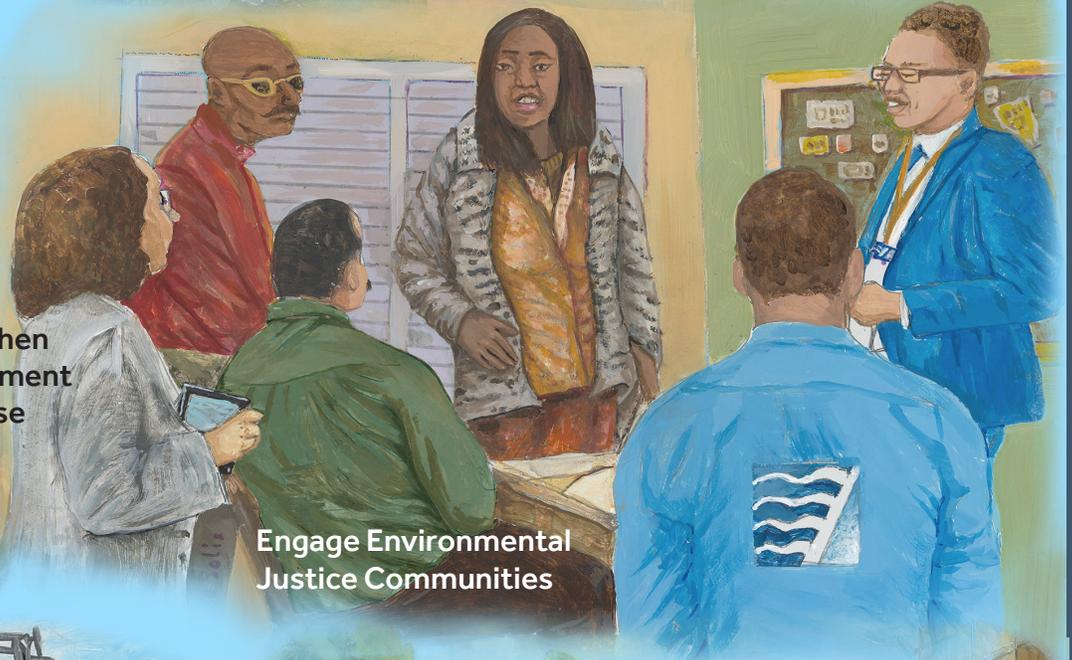


**Localize Air  
Quality Approach**

**Respond Quickly to Air Quality  
Complaints and Incidents**

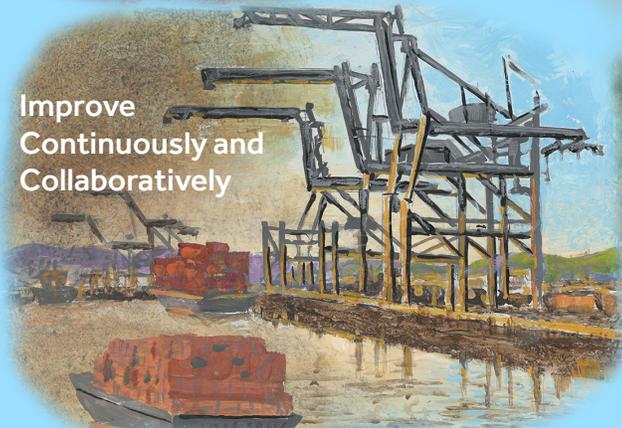


**Strengthen  
Enforcement  
Response**

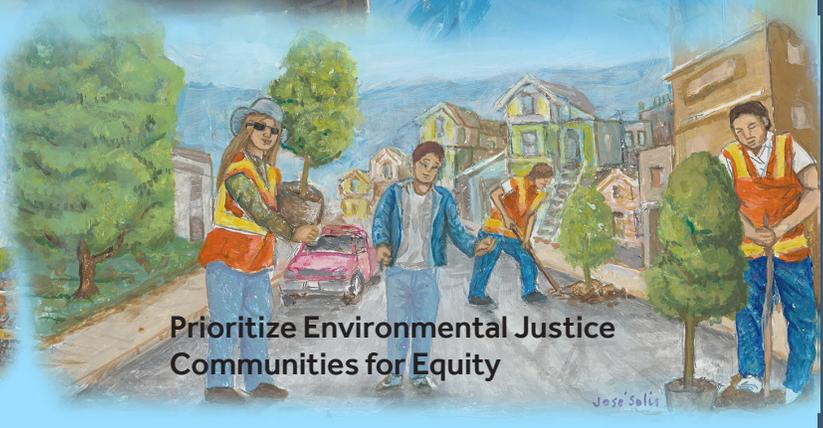


**Engage Environmental  
Justice Communities**

**Improve  
Continuously and  
Collaboratively**



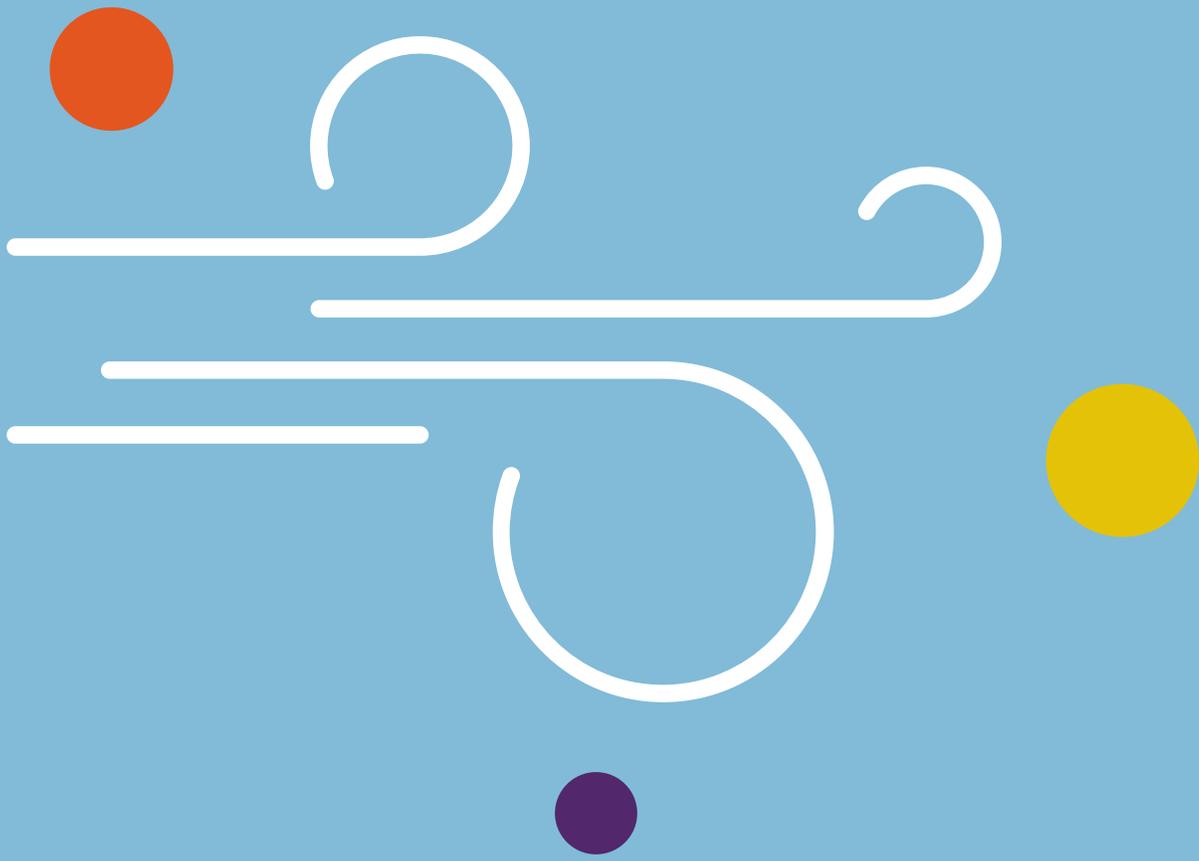
**Prioritize Environmental Justice  
Communities for Equity**



## **Our Environmental Justice Commitments**

The Community Advisory Council's advice on what environmental justice means and what the Air District should consider to advance environmental justice helped inform its new strategic direction: 80% of the strategies identified in the 2024 – 2029 Strategic Plan address one or more of the Environmental Justice Priorities.

Building on many discussions between the Air District's staff leadership, technical staff, and the Community Advisory Council's Environmental Justice Policy Ad Hoc Committee, and with the leadership of the Board of Directors and the Community Equity, Health, and Justice Committee, the Air District will develop measurable implementation plans for actions to advance environmental justice in communities across the Bay Area.



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