

## Narrative Questions

### Instruction:

These grants are intended to advance transportation equity by supporting projects that identify community transportation needs, build local capacity, and develop actionable plans or partnerships to address inequities in access, safety, affordability, reliability, and environmental outcomes. Applicants do not need to have all project details finalized — the grant can support planning, partnership development, and early implementation of priority activities.

Character limits and page equivalents are provided to help you focus responses; reviewers value clarity, completeness, and alignment with equity goals more than exact word count.

**Project Name:** Connect South Merced

### Question 1. Community Challenges and Priorities

Prompt: Describe the main transportation, access, or environmental challenges in your community that this project will help address. Why are these issues important to residents, and how do they relate to transportation equity? Focus on lived experiences, gaps in services, unsafe or costly travel, and populations most affected by inequities.

- Character Limit: 2,000 (about three-quarter page)
- Scoring Criteria: Project Vision & Community Need (25 points)

South Merced is a 7.39-square-mile community that was physically and economically isolated by the realignment of State Route 99 in the 1960's—redlining the neighborhood, concentrating environmental burdens, limiting access to safe transportation, and contributing to long-standing disinvestment for generations of residents.

South Merced is home to approximately 23,104 residents, many of whom are low-income, non-English speaking, and living in challenging environmental and transportation conditions. These conditions create barriers to mobility and participation in daily activities. California Healthy Places Index (HPI) reports low rates of personal vehicle ownership among South Merced residents, meaning many rely on walking, biking, or transit for daily travel. Despite this, South Merced has seen limited investment in active transportation and safety improvements.

The City's adopted Local Roadway Safety Plan (LRSP) identifies five corridors in South Merced's High Injury Network, with a concentration of serious crashes and fatalities. Conditions along these corridors reflect long-standing disinvestment, with gaps in sidewalk and bicycle infrastructure, unsafe or missing crossings, high vehicle speeds, and poor lighting, creating daily safety risks for residents, especially children, seniors, and people with disabilities. Improving transportation safety and access is critical to advance equity and improve daily life in South Merced.

Transportation inequities are compounded by high exposure to vehicle emissions and diesel pollution due to proximity to SR 99 and high traffic volumes. EPA EJScreen data places South

Merced in the 92<sup>nd</sup> percentile statewide for PM2.5 exposure, 75<sup>th</sup> percentile for diesel particulate matter, and shows traffic exposure exceeding 1.8 million vehicle-miles traveled per day. These conditions contribute to severe health impacts, including asthma, elevated heart disease, higher disability rates, and lower life expectancy than most of the state.

## **Question 2. Project Vision and Description**

Prompt: What is your vision for this project? Describe the proposed activities and how they will identify or address community transportation needs, advance transportation equity, and develop organizational and community capacity. Consider workforce development, community resiliency, and economic opportunities for community members. You do not need to have every detail finalized; the grant may support planning, piloting, or partnership-building activities.

- Character Limit: 2,500 (about 1 page)
- Scoring Criteria: Project Vision & Community Need (25 points)

The City of Merced's vision is to advance community-led transportation safety planning in South Merced by building local capacity while developing actionable, community-informed planning concepts for priority corridors. This project is intentionally designed to build partnerships and community by educating residents and community partners on transportation planning processes and shaping corridor concepts, ensuring these neighborhoods are better equipped to shape transportation decisions over the long term.

The planning project will establish a South Merced Collaborative Governance Structure (CGS) to guide inclusive engagement and shared decision-making. In partnership with Valley Onward and Merced Lao Family, trusted community-based organizations serving South Merced, the City will conduct reach-in engagement designed to meet residents where they are. These reach-in activities will include pop-up events, outreach at apartment complexes, and engagement in trusted community spaces such as schools, parks, and faith-based locations. The planned strategies are intended to reduce barriers to participation and center voices often excluded from planning designs.

Community input gathered through reach-in engagement will inform CGS-guided corridor prioritization, using the City's adopted LRSP High Injury Network (HIN) as a foundation while allowing community members to validate and refine priorities. The CGS will then conduct community workshops and design charrettes, providing residents the opportunity to review, create, and refine conceptual safety and active transportation improvements for the selected priority corridors.

CARB funding will support community-driven planning and partnership-building activities, allowing the City to test new engagement approaches in a disinvested and disengaged area, build readiness for future implementation of multimodal safety improvements, strengthen community

understanding of mobility needs, and build durable partnerships by establishing a CGS that can support future planning and funding opportunities.

### **Question 3. Project Community**

Prompt: Describe the community your project will benefit. Who lives, works, or goes to school there, and why was this community chosen? Include demographics, transportation access, and assets such as schools, transit stops, or Tribal housing. Tribal applicants may also describe governance structures or culturally guided priorities. Emphasize populations most affected by transportation inequities.

- Character Limit: 2,000 (about three-quarter page)
- Scoring Criteria: Project Vision & Community Need (25 points) and Communities of Focus (5 points)

South Merced, generally defined as the area south of 16<sup>th</sup> Street to the southern city limits, is home to a predominantly low-income and non-English speaking population. According to CalEnviroScreen, all five census tracts that make up South Merced qualify as disadvantaged communities. Approximately 60% of residents live in poverty, with a per capita income of \$16,004, among the lowest in the state. 74% of residents are non-English speaking, primarily Spanish-speaking (65%), and 23% of households are limited-English-speaking. The community includes many families with children, seniors, and renter households, many of whom are especially affected by unsafe transportation conditions. These challenges are rooted in inequities shaped by historic disinvestment and infrastructure decisions that continue to affect access, safety, and environmental conditions.

Transportation access is central to daily life in South Merced. According to the California Healthy Places Index, many residents rely on walking, biking, and transit for everyday travel. 16<sup>th</sup> Street, Childs Avenue, and R, G, and V Streets serve as critical routes connecting residents to schools, parks, food distribution sites, transit, and community services. Each of these corridors is a part of the High Injury Network, creating significant safety risks for people traveling on them.

Despite these challenges, South Merced has many strong community assets that can support effective engagement. Schools, parks, churches, food access sites, and trusted community-based organizations are active throughout the area, including Valley Onward and Merced Lao Family, which have deep roots and experience engaging residents. A map of community assets in South Merced can be found [here](#). While prior planning efforts have identified community needs, they often lacked sustained community decision-making power. There is a clear readiness for deeper, resident-led planning, supported by existing partnerships and community capacity.

### **Question 4. Engagement Approach**

Prompt: How will your project include community voices — especially low-income residents, Tribal members, youth, elders, or other groups often excluded from transportation decisions? Describe

outreach, supports for participation (translation, participation incentives), and how decision-making power will rest with the community. Highlight equitable engagement practices that inform planning and project design.

- Character Limit: 2,000 (about three-quarter page)
- Scoring Criteria: Community Engagement & Equity (20 points)

Community engagement for this project will be coordinated through the CGS, which will include community members, trusted community organizations, and City partners. This structure ensures engagement is ongoing, community-driven, and rooted in trust.

The CGS will include a Coordination Council and a Community Steering Committee, supported by City staff and working groups as needed. Residents and trusted community partners will play a direct and meaningful role in shaping engagement strategies, prioritizing corridors, and guiding planning outcomes. Membership will reflect the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic characteristics of South Merced, with an emphasis on engaging low-income households, non-English speakers, renters, youth, and seniors who are often excluded from transportation decision-making. Clear feedback loops will be maintained by sharing engagement summaries and demonstrating how community input directly informs planning concepts and decisions.

The project will use reach-in engagement strategies that meet residents where they are and reduce barriers to participation. These strategies will include pop-up events at parks, food banks, and apartment complexes, as well as canvassing and tabling at trusted community locations. Engagement activities will focus on understanding daily travel experiences, safety concerns, and priorities along key corridors.

To support equitable participation, the project will provide Spanish interpretation and translated materials, and meetings will be held at accessible times and locations to accommodate for work schedules, caregiving responsibilities, and transit access. These supports are intended to ensure meaningful participation from residents who are often excluded from planning, including non-English speakers, renters, youth, elders, and low-income households. Valley Onward and Merced Lao Family, as co-applicants, will work with the City to facilitate these supports and ensure resident participation.

#### **Question 5. Benefits to Priority Populations**

Prompt: Who will benefit from this project, and how will it improve their daily lives or reduce transportation inequities? Describe how engagement activities intentionally involve residents often excluded from planning and decision-making. Include capacity-building outcomes, understanding of clean transportation options, and any early actions the grant may fund to support these benefits.

- Character Limit: 1,200 (about half page)
- Scoring Criteria: Community Engagement & Equity (20 points)

Primary beneficiaries are low-income South Merced residents, including Spanish-speaking households, renters, families with children, youth, and seniors, who face unsafe walking/biking conditions, limited transit access, and long-standing exclusion from transportation decisions.

The project will produce community-informed safety and active transportation concepts for priority corridors used daily to reach schools, parks, food sites, transit stops, and essential services. Engagement activities will be designed to intentionally include residents often left out of planning through reach-in outreach, language access, and accessible meeting times and locations.

Capacity-building is a direct benefit. Residents participating through outreach and the Collaborative Governance Structure will increase planning literacy and confidence to share lived experience, help set corridor priorities, and review/refine concepts. The resulting concepts and engagement documentation will strengthen readiness to pursue future implementation funding, improving the likelihood that subsequent investments reflect South Merced priorities.

#### **Question 6. Partnership Structure**

Prompt: Describe the roles and responsibilities of the Lead Applicant, Sub- applicants, and Community Partners, and how decision-making power will rest with the community. Explain why each partner is well-suited for their role, how equity is built into the structure, and how potential power imbalances will be addressed. If partnership structures are not yet fully formed, describe how the grant will support their development. Optional diagrams may be attached.

- Character Limit: 2,000 (about three-quarter page)
- Scoring Criteria: Partnership & Collaboration (20 points)

The City of Merced will serve as the Lead Applicant, responsible for fiscal management, coordination among partners, and technical planning support. The City will ensure project completion and alignment with adopted plans, while also supporting a community-led approach to decision-making.

Valley Onward will lead culturally responsive outreach using its established promotoras model, drawing on deep trust and long-standing relationships with South Merced residents. Valley Onward brings extensive experience engaging low-income, Spanish-speaking households around issues of health, safety, and active living. The City has partnered with Valley Onward on several planning projects in the past, leveraging their relationships with residents to engage community members in planning activities. Merced Lao Family will support outreach and engagement tailored to the City's large Hmong population, ensuring language access, cultural relevance, and trust-building across diverse populations in South Merced. Most recently, Merced Lao Family played an integral role in community engagement for the design of General Vang Pao Park—a public space designed to celebrate Merced's Hmong community.

Project decision-making will be anchored in the CGS, which will serve as the central forum for shared leadership and accountability. The CGS will consist of a Coordination Council, the Community Steering Committee, and a Community Outreach Working Group. Together, these bodies ensure that residents and trusted community partners hold meaningful influence over engagement design, corridor prioritization, and planning direction. The partnership structure is intentionally designed to address historical power imbalances by embedding community partners directly into planning and decision-making roles. A transparent governance framework will be developed for the CGS to clarify roles, responsibilities, decision-making processes, and communication protocols.

### **Question 7. Activities & Deliverables**

Prompt: Summarize the key activities your project will carry out and expected outputs (reports, workshops, outreach materials, events). Use Appendix A: Attachment III, Scope and Timeline Template for detailed tasks and milestones. Include any early implementation or planning activities funded by the grant.

- Character Limit: 1,000 (about a third page)
- Scoring Criteria: Work Plan & Deliverables (15 points)

The project will implement planning and capacity-building activities to support community-led transportation safety planning in South Merced. Key activities include establishing the CGS to support inclusive, shared decision-making; conducting culturally responsive, reach-in community engagement; and facilitating community workshops to inform conceptual planning for priority active transportation and roadway safety corridors identified through the City's LRSP.

Engagement will be conducted with trusted community-based organizations and will include pop-up outreach at community gathering locations and accessible workshops with language support. Community input will be documented and synthesized to guide corridor prioritization and concept development.

Deliverables will include a written CGS governance framework, community engagement summaries, conceptual planning materials for two to three priority corridors, and a roadmap identifying next steps and potential funding opportunities.

### **Question 8. Grant Readiness**

Prompt: How is your organization (and partners) prepared to manage this grant? Highlight experience, staffing, systems, and any relevant past projects. Describe potential challenges and how you plan to address them. Explain how you will use the grant to build capacity if some areas (staff, partnerships, or systems) need support.

- Character Limit: 1,200 (about half a page)
- Scoring Criteria: Grant Readiness (10 points)

CARB Community Planning and Capacity Building Grant activities will be overseen by Management Analyst Leah Brown, who has managed over \$88 million in state and federal grants—including four Homekey awards. A full-time Administrative Analyst will be hired to support grant administration and coordination. The City has established financial controls, reporting systems, and grant compliance procedures to ensure timely deliverables, transparent accounting, and adherence to grant requirements.

Valley Onward and Merced Lao Family are well positioned to support implementation, bringing deep experiencing engaging low-income and linguistically isolated residents. Both organizations have long-standing relationships in South Merced and will help facilitate dialogue, strengthen participation, and elevate lived experience in planning processes.

The City recognizes potential challenges related to coordinating partners, sustaining meaningful participation, and building shared decision-making structures. CARB funding will support formal partner agreements, a clear governance framework, and capacity-building activities to strengthen coordination, clarify roles, and support equitable collaboration.

#### **Question 9. Budget Narrative**

Prompt: Provide a brief explanation of how you will use grant funds. Include priorities such as staff time, outreach, insurance, evaluation, and any early activities that need funding to advance capacity building and/or planning. Submit full details using Appendix A: Attachment IV, Budget Template.

- Character Limit: 1,000 (about a third page)
- Scoring Criteria: Budget & Resources (10 points)

An Administrative Analyst (1 FTE, \$151,796) will manage project implementation, fiscal oversight, reporting, compliance, partner coordination, and evaluation activities.

Contractual services (\$127,500) will support planning and corridor concept development, including technical analysis, mapping, design concepts, and preparation of planning documents.

Community engagement funds (\$150,000) will support Valley Onward and Merced Lao Family to lead culturally and linguistically responsive outreach, including community meetings, home meetings, pop-up events, surveys, focus groups, translation, and leadership development. Funding will fund 5 Promotoras, 5 Community Liaisons, and 2 Project Managers for the CBO partners. Contractual services (\$25,000) will support data collection, evaluation, and reporting in alignment with CARB requirements.

Indirect costs (10%) will support administrative functions, financial management, and organizational infrastructure for project implementation.

### **Question 10. Long-Term Sustainability**

Prompt: How will the benefits of your project continue after the grant ends? Describe strategies for sustaining outcomes through partnerships, funding, community engagement, and capacity-building. If long-term plans are not yet fully formed, describe how the grant will support development of these strategies and ensure equitable transportation outcomes.

- Character Limit: 1,200 (about a third page)
- Scoring Criteria: Strengthens overall case

The benefits of this project are designed to continue well beyond the CARB grant term by strengthening community leadership, institutional readiness, and durable planning structures in South Merced. Central to this approach is the Collaborative Governance Structure (CGS), which is intentionally designed to continue beyond the life of the grant as a standing forum for shared decision-making and community-City collaboration.

The community-informed corridor concepts developed through this project will provide a strong foundation for future applications for implementation funding. By aligning concepts with community priorities and adopted plans, the project will improve readiness for competitive funding opportunities. Sustained engagement is another key outcome. Trusted community partners will remain active in South Merced, continuing to support resident leadership, communication, and participation in future planning and implementation efforts. More broadly, the project will build lasting community and institutional capacity, allowing residents and CGS members to gain experience participating in planning and decision-making.

### **Question 11. Project Summary for Public Sharing**

Prompt: Provide a brief, plain-language summary of your project (max 1,000 characters). This may be shared publicly. Include:

- The community or population you will focus on
- The main transportation equity challenge or need
- The planning, capacity-building, or early implementation activities the grant will support
- The intended outcome or change by the end of the grant

Connect South Merced is a community-driven transportation planning project in South Merced, a historically disadvantaged area where many residents rely on walking, biking, and transit for daily travel. The project will focus on addressing multimodal transportation safety challenges along key neighborhood corridors used to access schools, parks, food sites, and other essential destinations.

Through partnerships with trusted community organizations, the project will support inclusive, culturally responsive engagement that centers residents who are often excluded from transportation decisions, including low-income households, Spanish-speaking residents, seniors, and youth. Community members will help prioritize corridors and shape planning concepts.

By the end of the grant, the project will produce community-informed safety and active transportation concepts and establish a Collaborative Governance Structure to support ongoing resident leadership and future implementation funding.