

Learnings from 1-on-1 listening sessions with REI working group members

Since the REI Working Group last met, staff have interviewed nine of the working group members to gather direct input from each member. These conversations were very helpful to get a lot of input, primarily from the public members, about how SACOG, as a government agency, can fulfill its commitments to reduce racial disparities through its work.

The interviews were wide-ranging, covering best practices from outside the region, examples of other practices within the region, as well as direct recommendations for what SACOG should do. The notes from the interviews are presented below categorized into three areas:

- I. SACOG's programs
- II. SACOG's operations
- III. SACOG's board practices.

They are further organized around five areas:

LISTEN and LEARN: Work to build and strengthen relationships with organizations representing historically marginalized communities in both urban and rural areas, to integrate their perspectives and priorities, and to give voice to these communities.

PLAN: Develop a racial equity action plan for SACOG's programs and operations, that includes measurable activities, and regularly review the plan to ensure the integration of policies, procedures and programs to advance racial equity.

SUPPORT: Provide continuous support to our member and partner agencies to integrate the agency's racial equity action into local plans, build and strengthen relationships with community-based organizations, non-profits, advocacy organizations, and other equity experts and practitioners;

ACT: Continue to build the capacity of the SACOG staff and board to fully implement SACOG's racial equity action plan, and carefully consider how our decision-making processes address historic inequities in transportation and housing;

MEASURE: Establish, regularly monitor, and report publicly on 1) regional equity indicators associated with housing, transportation, and economic opportunity; 2) organizational equity indicators of employee and stakeholder (community members, public agencies, non-governmental partners) experience of existing policies, practices, and procedures; and 3) indicators of authentic project sponsor engagement in the planning and design of regionally significant projects.

These have been summarized and edited for clarity, but are intended to convey what we heard. Some of the same ideas were presented by more than one interviewee. There are also some ideas that may be different approaches. Unless otherwise indicated in the comment, the term "community" means any group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common. The terms equity and inclusion are defined per the definitions in the attached glossary.

We hope that the discussion from the working group will help give staff direction on what ideas should be prioritized in the racial equity action plan.

I. What do these notes tell us we can do to make SACOG's programs more equitable and inclusive?

LISTEN AND LEARN

1. When reaching out to communities, understand the framework of the community. Do your homework.
2. We have to be better about knowing what we don't know and being honest about what we don't understand.
3. We need to give people the opportunity to engage and not speak for them or filter them out.
4. It's important not to be focused on fixing when we listen. Focus on education on the front end before asking for answers or solutions to address racial equity.
5. Ensure enough time to gain community support. There is a lack of trust in government in underserved communities.
6. Think about in which contexts SACOG will directly work with CBOs, and when cities/counties will work with CBOs.
7. Getting CBOs to the table without overtaxing them is key.
8. Using standing community meetings rather than one-off meetings for SACOG can provide consistency, which is key to get folks engaged and hopefully committed. But it must be worth their while and time.
9. English speaking and hearing persons take for granted the ability to participate in public meetings. Consider participating through translation of ASL interpreter, and when that goes poorly, the frustration of participating.
10. Learn about different communities: field trips to projects/communities – if it isn't practical to visit in person – making short videos – particularly with some data and stories mixed in – with community voices.
11. Think about whose voice is being left out in a community discussion.
12. Consider that experiences are different based on income level, even within racial/ethnic groups.
13. Be inviting and welcoming in our engagement of people, so all attendees are open to listening and learning.
14. Organize community members, explain to them how SACOG works, bring them to meetings, and encourage them to speak.
15. Think about both the engagement of Native American individuals and Native American tribal governments.

SUPPORT

16. Advise agencies applying for federal grants to look at data in project area by race and ethnicity and understand and articulate how the project will impact those populations.
17. Work with transit agencies to take closer look at riders' issues.
18. Use a combination of data and stories to illustrate the importance of racial equity, policies, programs, investments. You don't get to influence how people think without telling human stories.
19. Survey local jurisdictions regularly on their racial equity work.
20. Encourage engagement with diverse and inclusive non-profit agencies/committees.
21. Foster a way for elected leaders to put aside their assumptions about their community, and look into their own communities to learn who is being left out.
22. Provide training to local agency staff on figuring out how to reach marginalized populations, on learning the experiences of the people they serve, and on how to work with others in the community who may have better relationships or trust with that marginalized community.

23. Support local staff to educate their elected leaders on the challenging issues in their community.
24. Provide opportunity for local staffs to re-learn how to listen. And to not be afraid to educate their elected officials. Staff are reluctant to say what the real problems are, they want to paint a rosier picture. But you need to show your real need to be able to address that need.
25. Create training for local agencies in how to: identify disparities in their jurisdiction, work with communities to build and implement racial equity in those neighborhoods, then encourage each local government to identify the poorest, most disinvested neighborhoods in their jurisdiction and then work with the neighborhoods to build racial equity there.

ACT

26. Require funding recipients to engage constituents. Don't just require percentages to meet goals because people will do the least amount that they can do and not the actual engagement part that is so important.
27. Consider CBOs as "consultants," and instead of doing simple MBE/WBE percent, the qualification should be firm (or church/community group/CBO) that knows the community well.
28. Consider if SACOG is positioned to talk directly with community groups or more to give guidance to member agencies to help them identify and work with CBOs.
29. Utilize CBOs to facilitate community engagement/voices – need a variety because they have different perspectives, strengths and connections.
30. Examine all of SACOG's advisory groups and committees to see where we already engage CBOs and figure out how to piggyback/consolidate their engagement so they are not over-asked/overtaxed.
31. Community meetings – provide interpretation, ASL – ways to make it easier for people to understand what they're getting involved in.
32. Have people with lived experience running committees.
33. Show community members they are equally valued to consultants: provide them stipends or pay for CBOs/community members to participate in SACOG projects and programs.
34. Set policies for plans, programs, funding, so that every jurisdiction should know that if they are going to apply for funding from SACOG, it needs to be for communities that need it, the grass roots support it, and the applicant represents the community voice.
35. Be what we say we are: attend the events where we show we value racial equity and inclusion.
36. Think about what language access looks like in SACOG's programs.
37. Think about how we can ask communities for data without being extractive.
38. Have a focused effort to address the transportation needs of students.
39. When reaching out to tribal governments, have clear 'why we are here and talking with you.'
40. When reaching out to Native Americans for representation, ensure equal emphasis on tribal governments and community members.
41. Show more diversity amongst the panels speaking to groups.
42. Continue SACOG's Youth Leadership Academy and teach them our region's history so we can do better.

MEASURE

43. Review other equity indices and consider adopted them or developing a SACOG equity index.
44. Work with local agencies/lead agencies, to be able to define what "improving racial equity" means.
45. Regularly report on race/ethnicity data to board and public.
46. A measure of success: when everyone can say "I'm really fortunate. I live in a fabulous city."
47. In SACOG's data collection focus on filling in the gap of reporting for tribal communities and Native Americans (typically misreported and/or underreported, eg traffic safety data).

48. To be honest about addressing some of the issues that have been identified—racial equity, affordability—define outcomes that can be measured and reported on. E.g., how many units of affordable housing were actually built? Did local jurisdictions do something to advance equity in their community?
49. make sure equity and inclusion requirements on contractors is strong, because they will only do the minimum requirement.
50. A diversity of people are participating in SACOG events/programs/engagements.
51. Regularly ask questions about all of our existing programs: how do [stakeholder groups] find out about that opportunity? To make sure we are refreshing our processes with an equity lens.
52. Is anyone better off because of the work we did? Outreach we did? Decision we made? Process we ran?
53. Require grant requests to describe their quantifiable benefit to communities of color.
54. Set SACOG funding requirements to the standard of equity, not to a minimum amount. E.g., if we want people of color, or community voices, to be involved in a program, set a standard or requirement that gets them meaningfully weighing in/shaping the program.

II. What do these notes tell us we can do to make SACOG’s operations more equitable and inclusive?

LISTEN & LEARN

- Implement a Safe Place Forum for inclusiveness
- Support staff providing a voice for DEI
- Honest perspectives/expectations
- Agency leadership and management talk regularly about progress on SACOG’s racial equity commitment and work to staff and stakeholders.
- Ask how SACOG can think about racial equity in hiring, promotion, retention, budgeting, and contracts.
- Training on finding and learning the experience of the people you serve.
- Training on figuring out how to reach those populations – e.g., who are the trusted organizations/people that will assist you to reach those populations?
- Sometimes you need someone who has had lived experiences to communicate those experiences.
- Value people for the cultural experience they bring to an organization, on the same level as their technical expertise or educational credentials.

SUPPORT

10. Consultants and training programs available to staff through our partners.
11. Support scholarships in the transportation and planning field.
12. Racial equity trainings for staff using outside consultants.
13. Assemble a GARE (Government Alliance on Racial Equity) cohort of jurisdictions and SACOG staff.
14. Providing training to local agency staffs is essential.

ACT

15. Make sure someone owns it.
16. Celebration of different cultural events.
10. For procurement, consider preferences for veterans and BIPOC owned businesses.

17. Set SACOG procurement and contracting policies to the standard of equity, not to a minimum amount. E.g., if we want people of color, or community voices, to be involved in a program, set a standard or requirement that gets them meaningfully weighing in/shaping the program.
18. Recruit for diverse workforce. Recruitment efforts in the broader community—need the staff to represent the communities we serve.
19. When onboarding, present the agency’s values and make sure in those values is inclusivity, and one where everyone can speak their voice, share their opinion, and not be chastised for it.
20. Employ a change management process through human resources.
21. Anywhere SACOG makes a decision is where equity can be infused.
22. Develop a multi-year training program for staff that has more intensive training for staff working directly on racial equity initiatives, and shorter sessions for all staff.
23. Institutional-level change needs to not be focused on individual/interpersonal change. That is how you get institutional change. Otherwise, you do not get to the root issues of the institution.

MEASURE

24. A measure of success: increasing the diversity of our staff.
25. Equitable and inclusive assessments and real action.
26. Publish the Racial Equity Action Plan and be transparent about metrics. Be clear in the plan when it is reviewed, how often it is updated, what the horizons are for different metrics.
27. A measurement: is anyone better off because of the work we did? Outreach we did? Decision we made? Process we ran?

III. What do these notes tell us we can do to make SACOG’s board practices more equitable and inclusive?

LISTEN & LEARN

1. We have to be better about knowing what we don’t know and being honest about what we don’t understand.
2. The leaders of the agency (board or staff) need to show up and be present in the places where these conversations are being had.
3. Board members should get out to other communities in the region to help them understand what “underserved” looks like in other communities.
4. Invite tribes to sit on the SACOG board.
5. Have people with lived experience running committees.
6. Use field trips to projects/communities for the SACOG board so they see other communities in the region, to understand what underserved looks like in different parts of the region, especially outside of their county. Board members could host the tours, talk peer-to-peer about issues.
7. Elected officials have to look into their own community. Put aside their assumptions about their community. Even if you live in a small rural community, you often live in your own bubble. It’s who you’re comfortable with. Unless you make an effort, to see who’s there, meet with them, speak to them, we all get lost in our own assumptions and a lot of times our assumptions are wrong.
8. Create chances for community leaders/grass tops to present about their communities.
9. For the board, ask them “what does equitable community engagement look like?”
10. It is important for elected officials to understand other communities in the region. Some of this can come through staff instead of relying on community members. Have SACOG staff meet one-on-one with board members and find out what they want to know. Brief them. Answer their questions in a safe, one-on-one environment as human beings.

11. Have board members report back on their progress on racial equity efforts. Have a regular agenda item on that at SACOG. That also creates a forum for community members to weigh in.
12. For local officials & staff, continue guest speakers, send to conferences—get people exposed to different perspectives. Local government officials need to hear what is actually going on in their community.
13. It's important too to spend a lot of time doing background educating for both elected officials and the community members. Organize community members and explain to them how SACOG works, bring them to meetings, and encourage them to speak.
14. Partner with CBOs and prepare case studies to tell stories in writing and video. Personal stories really hit home the policy issues.
15. Regarding engagement, throw out what you know. Don't assume. It's so easy to assume.

SUPPORT

16. Help the elected officials by being a bridge/voice from the community organizations and underserved populations. Provide them a way to get their voice heard, as not all CBOs are as vocal as others.
17. Provide opportunities for conferences and other venues for local officials to get exposed to different perspectives.
18. If you want elected officials to understand communities, you need to create chances for people to present about their communities. The communities also need more information about what is happening at SACOG so that they can offer their perspective on the issues before you.

ACT

19. How do we use the board agenda to bring perspective and set the table for the emerging trends and issues affecting the region.
20. Reimburse CBOs for their time/energy spent engaging with SACOG.
21. Something like this working group needs to continue, for SACOG to hold itself accountable.
22. Partnering with community base agencies, chambers, and public transit agencies
23. Have a regular agenda item on racial equity efforts at SACOG public meetings so SACOG can be accountable and also create forum for community members to weigh in.
24. Anywhere the board makes a decision is an opportunity to infuse equity.
25. Forward the REAP to the SACOG board for adoption as a policy document.

MEASURE

26. Regularly report on regional race/ethnicity data to board and public.
27. A measurement: is anyone better off because of the work we did? Outreach we did? Decision we made? Process we ran?
28. Award funding towards the programs/projects that have a quantifiable benefit of communities of color.