

# Final Report: California Tribal Nations Transportation Planning Needs Assessment Study

Project 2154  
March 2023

Seetha Reddy, PhD Ashley Parker, PhD David Reinke, MS, MRP Kaely Colligan, BA

## Introduction

Due to the general lack of information about transportation needs and infrastructure of California's Tribal Nations, this study identified the current state of transportation planning activities, understood needs and capacities, and partnered with California's 109 Tribal Nations so that Caltrans can meaningfully engage with them early in the planning process to help meet their transportation needs. The data was collected through a survey questionnaire sent to the Tribal Nations. The responses show that most Tribal Nations in California have several challenges, including technical and staff capacity, funding for data collection and planning, a lack of resources to meet transportation needs, and a dearth of collaborative partnerships with the local, state, and federal agencies. This study identifies specific needs and recommendations for future engagement between Caltrans, local, state, and federal agencies, and the Tribal Nations. This is a collaborative project by Caltrans and the Mineta Transportation Institute, San Jose State University.

## Study Methods

California is home to 109 federally recognized Tribal Nations distributed across the state, many in remote areas. This required creative data collection methods, which were adjusted due to the COVID-19 pandemic; in particular, in-person interviews could not be conducted. The study team, in collaboration with Caltrans staff, designed a questionnaire to identify Tribal perceptions and needs either within and nearby their lands, by asking questions in the following categories: primary transportation needs, the current status of the transportation planning on Tribal lands, needs for and technical assistance for transportation planning; and availability of funding for transportation planning and implementation.

The questionnaire was provided to every Tribal Nation in three different formats: (1) emailed document, (2) email with a hyperlink to an online web-based version, and (3) a USPS-mailed hard copy. A major task was to engage and support Tribal Nations to ensure that Tribal opinions were heard and, if needed, assist them in completing the survey. The research team maintained a communication log, accessible to Caltrans, to keep them informed of progress and challenges. The data was compiled into an MS Access database with 204 fields and that is portable rather than web-based due to constraints on the web hosting protocol of Caltrans' Division of Transportation Planning and Caltrans' DRISI. While the database includes the survey's raw data to allow future studies using the same or similar questionnaires, a series of predefined queries were created for the most popular data requests that users may need.

## Findings

The study resulted in six key findings:

1. There is no observed correlation between whether a Tribal Nation has a transportation or public works department and whether it has updated or is updating its LRTP.
2. It is difficult to determine whether there is a relationship between a Tribal Nation's understanding of its transportation planning and its identification of specific transportation needs due to the high rate of incomplete surveys.
3. Tribal Nations could identify deficiencies and priorities in their transportation planning and needs.
4. Tribal Nations have identified their needs and challenges but have varying capabilities to engage in transportation planning. They generally need

long-term planning and engineering assistance for developing transportation infrastructure, professional transportation planning, and implementation. Most Tribal Nations do not have a transportation specialist on staff.

5. The majority of respondents indicated an immediate need for both training and funding, including informational and technical training ranging from technical workshops on developing LRTP; adaptive planning; safety plans; and several types of agreements; collecting, accessing, and analyzing different data; applying for grants; an overview of transportation and environmental review processes; and GIS training.
6. Many Tribal Nations perceived a lack of engagement with agencies (local, state, and federal) and responses to their requests for assistance being ignored or delayed. Since many Tribal Nations only have a single staff person who oversees transportation planning and several other administrative tasks, their ability to engage in transportation planning with agencies requires staff who specialize in transportation.

### Policy/Practice Recommendations

Based on the study's key findings, recommendations were made to address Tribal capacity and ability, technical knowledge or knowledge building, and coordination with other agencies. To help increase Tribal capacity and ability, the recommendations included a rent-a-planner program, where junior-level planners hired by the regional agency can be "loaned out" to Tribal Nations for a set period. Towards technical knowledge building, we provided recommendations on developing workshops tailored to Tribal needs as identified through the questionnaire.

Finally, two suggestions were made to address coordination efforts: a collaborative roadshow and a review of interagency coordination with the Tribal Nations. These recommendations require additional funding and staff with unique qualifications and experience to engage with the Tribal Nations. Nevertheless, there is no simple solution for agencies to build relationships based on trust and collaboration

with the Tribal Nations, given the difficult history between the United States government and the Indigenous people.

Transportation planning needs and capabilities vary across Tribal Nations, requiring a tailored approach for technical assistance to achieve equity in transportation.

### About the Authors

#### Seetha Reddy, PhD

Dr. Reddy has been working as an ethnographer since 1988, and one of the dimensions of her ethnographic research in California has included interviews with Tribes, communities, and individuals.

#### Ashley Parker, PhD

Dr. Parker has been working as an ethnographer since 2007 in academic, governmental, and cultural resource management settings throughout Utah, Nevada, and California.

#### David Reinke, MS, MRP

Mr. David Reinke is a transportation engineer/economist with over 40 years of experience in travel demand modeling, transportation economics, statistical analysis, survey design and management, database management, and software engineering.

#### Kaely Colligan, BA

Ms. Kaely Colligan currently serves as a Senior Archaeologist and the Data Management Director at Far Western where she started her career in 2009.

### To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at [transweb.sjsu.edu/research/2154](https://transweb.sjsu.edu/research/2154)



MTI is a University Transportation Center sponsored by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Research and Technology and by Caltrans. The Institute is located within San José State University's Lucas Graduate School of Business.