

LCI Tribal Roundtable Series #1: General Plan Guidelines (Roundtable 1)

Overview

The following document contains a high-level summary that reflects the perspectives shared by Tribal representatives who attended Roundtable 1. It is not intended to represent the views of all Tribes statewide, nor does it capture the full breadth of Tribal experiences with consultation or planning processes. Some points raised – such as preferences around certified mail or specific engagement methods – may differ among Tribes, and we recognize that practices and needs vary widely across communities. This summary is meant to accurately reflect what we heard in this single conversation and will help inform our broader understanding as we continue engaging with Tribes throughout future roundtables.

High-Level Summary

One foundational pillar raised by a Roundtable attendee is that all California lands, airs, and waters are Native lands, airs, and waters. Tribal representatives consistently describe that cities, counties, and planners reach out very late in planning processes, or with pre-designed ideas of what the guardrails are for the planning they want to do. We heard that by the time a Tribe receives a notice, most decisions are already made and there is little room for genuine input.

We also heard that notices arrive inconsistently through mass emails, blocked links, or letters that are dated long before they are actually mailed. Tight timelines, especially the standard 30-day response window, do not align with Tribal staff capacity or cultural responsibilities, including ceremonies that can take multiple weeks and can be unexpected, such as a loss of a community member.

Tribes highlighted that consultation is a legal obligation for agencies. A Tribe's lack of response does not mean consent, and consultation is incomplete until the Tribe actually receives the notice.

Agencies often treat consultation as a checkbox or rely on consultants who lack cultural humility. We also heard that consulting agencies often do not understand their legal and statutory obligation for Consultation. Tribes want earlier engagement, reliable notifications, flexible timelines, and stronger accountability.

Summary of Discussion – Tribal Roundtable 1

Question 1: How do cities and non-Tribal planners typically engage with your community on projects?

Discussion:

1. Notices often arrive late and reduce the ability to participate.

Cities, counties, and other agencies usually send consultation notices only after a project is already defined. Tribes often receive information when decisions have already been made, which limits the opportunity for meaningful input. This creates a situation where Tribes are responding to plans rather than helping shape them.

2. Notifications come through inconsistent and unreliable methods.

Engagement typically arrives through email, hard-copy letters, or both. Letters may be dated earlier than their actual mailing date. Emails often contain links that cannot be opened because of firewalls. Some agencies send consultation notices through mass emails with multiple Tribes copied at once or use informal plan-check sheets instead of proper correspondence. These practices make the process confusing and disrespectful.

3. Agencies frequently send information with strict timelines that do not account for Tribal capacity.

Most notices give a 30-day response period. This does not reflect the realities of Tribal staffing or cultural commitments such as ceremonies and mourning periods. Many Tribes cannot review or respond within that timeframe, which makes meaningful engagement difficult.

4. Planners often arrive with pre-designed ideas and limited understanding of Tribal perspectives.

Agencies commonly come with planning concepts that are already shaped. Instead of asking Tribes to help guide early thinking, planners present ready-made ideas. This demonstrates a lack of cultural humility and an assumption that Tribal knowledge is optional rather than essential. Consultants hired by agencies may also lack neutrality or cultural awareness, which undermines the process.

5. Tribal input is often treated as procedural rather than meaningful.

Many Tribes experience consultation as a checklist activity rather than a genuine relationship. Even when Tribes participate and share guidance, they rarely see their feedback reflected in project outcomes. This reinforces the perception that engagement is used to satisfy compliance rather than build trust.

Question 2: What is the most important piece of guidance your Tribe needs non-Tribal planners to understand?

Discussion:

1. Consultation needs to start early.

Tribes want to be involved before plans, studies, or alternatives are created. When consultation happens after decisions are already in place, Tribal voices cannot meaningfully shape the project.

2. Consultation is the agency's responsibility.

If a Tribe never receives the notification, the agency has not fulfilled its obligation. Tribes can choose not to engage, but agencies do not have that choice. Lack of response does not equal consent. Certified mail is one of the best ways to ensure the Tribe actually receives the notice.

3. Cultural humility matters.

Tribes prefer cultural humility over cultural competency. Humility means ongoing listening, learning, and adjusting. Tribes should define what cultural humility training looks like and who needs to participate. This should include planners, consultants, boards of supervisors, and elected officials.

4. Timelines must respect Tribal responsibilities.

Strict 30-day windows do not consider staff capacity or cultural obligations. Some ceremonies, including death ceremonies, require two to three weeks when Tribal members cannot respond. Timelines should be created with flexibility and with Tribal input.

5. Tribes should be able to define their preferred follow-up methods.

Agencies should ask each Tribe how they want communication to occur. This may include in-person meetings, multiple follow-ups, or meeting in Tribal homelands.

6. Consultation is not consent.

Tribes want planners to show how Tribal input influenced the project. Without this, consultation becomes performative rather than meaningful.

7. Agencies must consult with all relevant Tribes.

It is not acceptable to consult with just one Tribe because it is easier or more responsive. Multiple Tribes often have cultural ties to the same land.

Question 3: What key improvements and resources would help strengthen the working relationship between Tribes and non-Tribal planners?

Discussion:

1. Use certified mail and consistent notification methods.

Certified mail helps document when a notice is received. Avoid mass emails, firewalled links, and informal documents. Send notices individually to each Tribe.

2. Build accountability and enforcement into guidance.

Guidelines without consequences become optional. Agencies often act based on legal risk, so guidance should clearly communicate that ignoring consultation creates real risk. This helps ensure compliance.

3. Require cultural humility training for all staff.

Training should be mandatory, recurring, and enforceable. It should include planners, consultants, supervisors, department staff, and elected officials. Because turnover is common, training needs to be ongoing.

4. Let Tribes guide how engagement should happen.

Some Tribes prefer in-person meetings or hosting discussions on their land. Agencies should coordinate engagement based on each Tribe's preferences.

5. Clarify the difference between Tribal cultural resources and historic resources.

Tribes want clearer language that distinguishes the two and ensures that Tribal cultural landscapes and ancestral sites are recognized correctly.

6. Provide more capacity support and flexibility.

Many Tribes have limited staff and multiple responsibilities. Extended review periods, funding support, and staff resources would help make consultation more effective and respectful.