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**Community Feminism and Politics;
A Case Study of Santa Clara County as the Feminist Capital, 1975-2006**

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In 2002 the success of women in politics in the Bay Area made headline news, when Nancy Pelosi was elected as the first female democratic leader of the House of Representatives, followed by her 2007 victory as the first woman elected to the Speaker of the House. The *San Jose Mercury News* ran the headline “The Bay Area’s Old Girls’ Network is thriving,” describing the region as an incubator for women in politics. Pelosi’s political trajectory can be traced to the 1970s when South Bay women made giant inroads into politics as result of community feminist activism. In this time period, San Jose and Santa Clara County become known as the “Feminist Capital” of the nation, starting with the mayoral success of Janet Gray Hayes, who became the first elected female mayor in the United States of a city of 500,000. Her political ascendancy represented a watershed for female office holders in the state and nation. In California, women served at all levels of government, from the Mayor’s office to the California Assembly, and eventually Congress.¹

The rise of second wave feminism and the momentum of the Equal Rights Amendment raised the consciousness of women across the nation. Bay Area social activism occurred on multiple fronts, and the economic and social prosperity of the Silicon Valley created an extremely favorable environment for women interested in pursuing political office. In Santa Clara County middle class women joined grass roots organizations to improve family and community life through slow-growth initiatives, smart planning, and environmental policies. These activities opened new doors to political office and other high-level positions in city and county government.

This paper will examine the role of a few of these South Bay political pioneers drawing from a series of oral histories I conducted between 2006-2007. Oral histories of this kind enrich our understanding of the challenges women faced as they entered a male dominated political system. This regional case study will illustrate the fluidity of feminism in shaping community life and promoting responsive public policies. Women

¹ The Bay Area’s Old Girls’ Network is Thriving, *San Jose Mercury News*, Feb. 17, 2002

brought to the fore a different brand of politics, and as women and feminists, these leaders promoted programs, initiatives, policies and legislation that addressed urban crime, domestic violence, child abuse, public and industrial health, and urban sprawl and protection of the environment. South Bay women opened new doors for social and political activism in their communities, and helped reshape the American political landscape.

Historical Political Environment:

San Jose and the Clara County history have deep agricultural roots. Fruit production led the regions economic base from the early 1870s to the early 1970s, but during the post-war years, the region began to make its mark as the technology leader of the nation.² In the 1930s the city leaders recognized that they needed more industry than agriculture to sustain the local economy. Looking toward the future, the city leaders created a “Master Plan” to put San Jose on the map following World War II. The 1958 Master Plan accurately predicted that the region would become one of the most important centers in the West. Between 1950 and 1970 the population increased in size from 95,280 to 445,779.³ As the population boom continued, pro-development became a dominant theme in city government, and the city secured premium strips of land, by annexing large pieces of land away from the county and other competing cities. Annexation strained municipal services, which gave birth to the anti-growth and environmental movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Today San Jose is the 10th largest city in the United States, boasting a population over one million; environmental and land development issues continue to dominate policymaking in this region.⁴

In 1962 the first anti-growth grassroots campaign challenged San Jose city hall for the first time in its history. Local neighborhood organizations supported the anti-incumbent platform, resulting in the election of the first councilwoman, Virginia Shaffer. Shaffer’s success and those following her can be traced to the city’s failure to provide

² Glenna Mathews, *Silicon Valley, Women, and the California Dream* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 13-31, 45-47; Janet A. Flammang, *Women’s Political Voice: How women are Transforming the Practice and Study of Politics* (Temple University Press, 1997), 3538; Danelle Moon, “Educational Housekeepers: Female Reformers and the California Americanization Program, 1900-1927” *California History: A Topical Approach*, Edited by Gordon Morris Bakken (Harlan Davidson, 2003)108-112.

³ Philip J. Trounstine and Terry Christensen, *Movers and Shakers: The Study of Community Power* (St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1982), 79.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 91-108.

adequate municipal services to the growing population, from water, police and fire, schools, pollution control, and the continued loss of open spaces and parks. Homeowner and neighborhood groups, largely comprised of activist homemakers, spearheaded slow-growth and smart planning, which opened the door for the “Feminist Capital”. The next generation of women office holders launched their political careers on these issues and worked closely with grass-roots organizations to win elections.⁵

In 1971 the Santa Clara County Chapter of National Women’s Political Caucus (NWPC) formed and within six months had 1000 members. The NWPC facilitated women’s political campaigns and provided a network of “Good Ole Gals” to counter male political culture, and promoted female candidates in the state. In 1977 San Jose hosted the national organization’s annual meeting, which further cultivated new female candidates and gave rise to the Feminist Capital. Thus the Bay Area became an incubator of feminist politics and served as a model for other states.⁶

Feminist Capital Profile

Historian Glenna Matthews and Political Scientist Janet Flammang in their studies on female political activism point to the economic conditions that transformed San Jose politics. Flammang remarked that the majority of these women benefited from their own affluence, high level of education, strong community and women’s networks, and the “clean government” mentality of South Bay residents. Most of the women interviewed, with the exception of Blanca Alvarado, came to San Jose during the early wave of the aerospace and engineering boom and came from middle class neighborhoods. Alvarado came from the Hispanic barrio of East San Jose. District elections and grassroots activism converged opening new doors to women and minorities. Notwithstanding the affluence brought on by high-tech industry, San Jose became a hotbed for labor activism that reached across industries, from the farm labor strikes to city and county worker strikes, and high-tech labor disputes. Women worked on both sides of the political spectrum. Female office holders worked to support pay equity, organized the Commission on the

⁵Matthews, 95-103; Janet A. Flammang, “Female Officials in the Feminist Capital: The Case of Santa Clara County,” *Women’s Political Quarterly* 38 no. 1 (March 1985), 38-41; Trounstine & Christensen, 99-101.

⁶ Jim Puzanghera, “The Bay Area’s Old Girls’ Network is Thriving,” *SJMN*, February 17, 2002, Janet Gray Hayes Papers, SJSU.

Status of Women, while working women went out on the picket line demanding equal pay for equal work, and in the electronic industry, workers pushed corporations to address public health and environmental standards in the industry.⁷

Political scientist Terry Christensen remarked that in the wake of the post-Watergate years, female office holders offered a fresh choice to voters and had a clear advantage as candidates, because they were “clean and were outside the pockets of developers.” In the 1974 “Survey of Voter Attitudes in the City of San Jose,” prepared for the Janet Gray Hayes election campaign for mayor confirmed the view that women were more honest and less corruptible than men. The majority of those polled (57%) stated that it made no difference whether the mayor was male or female, and 47% felt that more women were needed on the City Council. Voter perceptions and the momentum of the women’s movement, combined with the economic prosperity of the Silicon Valley produced a climate extremely favorable to female office holders to improve family and community life through slow-growth initiatives, smart planning, and environmental and public health policies.⁸

[Who were these women who made up the feminist capital and what contributions did they make?](#) I will present brief sketches of Janet Gray Hayes, Susanne Wilson, Diane McKenna, Susan Hammer, Blanca Alvarado, and Leona Egeland, based from the oral histories conducted in 2006-2007. All of these women connected to their communities through traditional routes from the PTA, LWV, NWPC, YWCA, and other social justice organizations. They shared common goals in wanting to improve their communities and to influence policy that addressed a variety of social, economic, environmental issues, while addressing issues specific to women and children. They identified with the goals of the ERA and with the feminist movement.

Janet Gray Hayes

⁷ Janet Flammang, “Female Officials in the Feminist Capital: The Case of Santa Clara County,” *Women’s Political Quarterly* 38 no. 1 (March 1985), 44-49, 94-118; Matthews, 102-111.

⁸ Flammang, *Women’s Political Voices*,” 40-42; Philip J. Trounstine and Terry Christensen, *Movers and Shakers; The Study of Community Power* (St. Martin’s Press, 1982), 103-108; “A Survey of Voter Attitudes in the City of San Jose, August 17-26, 1974, Prepared for the Janet Gray Hayes for Mayor Campaign, Robert Mang, Campaign Manager, by Diridon Research Corporation, September 19, 1974, Janet Gray Hayes Papers, SJSU.

Janet Gray Hayes grew up in a politically active Republican family in Rushville Indiana. She graduated from Indian University in 1948, and went on to the University of Chicago where she earned an MA in social work. She married Kenneth Hayes, a native of San Jose, and they have four children. Prior to moving to California, Gray Hayes worked as a psychiatric social worker with the Jewish Family Service Agency, while her husband attended medical school. She became involved with the PTA, and the LWV and served as the president of the San Jose branch before entering political life. Gray Hayes's appointment to the San Jose Redevelopment Agency launched her political career and she became the first female chairperson of this agency before entering city politics (1975-1982). Appointment to this agency has served as a springboard for many other women in local politics.

As the first female mayor of San Jose, she received incredible local and national publicity, and helped position Santa Clara County to become the "Feminist Capital of the world." This combined with the success of other female candidates across the U.S. led a number of national magazines to run stories on the role of women, feminism, and politics. *Time*, *People*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and even some international papers carried stories highlighting the success of these female candidates. Gray Hayes was featured in a number of articles, alongside Diane Feinstein of San Francisco, Jane Byrne of Chicago, Isabella Cannon of Raleigh, North Carolina, Carole McCellan of Austin, Texas, and Margaret Hance of Phoenix, Arizona. In 1979 the *U.S. News and World Report* ran a story highlighting the recent victories of women in politics across the U.S. According to this report 750 cities had female mayors out of 18,800 municipalities—women were making clear inroads into politics at all levels. From 1975 to 1979 the number of women in public office increased from 4.7% to 10.9%, with the largest increase at the local and state levels.⁹

As the first female mayor Gray Hayes faced an up-hill battle breaking down gender stereotypes and discrimination for male office holders in San Jose and across the nation. During her first election campaign she was frequently characterized as an "argumentative housewife," while her male opponent was described as assertive. She

⁹ "In More Big Cities, it's "Her Honor the Mayor," *U.S. News and World Report*, July 16, 1979, 53; Joan Libman, "What Makes Janet Run?," *Family Circle* (February 19, 1980)

won the election but the newspaper coverage continued to focus on her role as housewife, and ignored her experience on the San Jose Redevelopment Commission and the City Council. Her first experience at a U.S. Conference of Mayors meeting is illustrative of the difficulties she faced as the lone female in a sea of male politicians: “I was the only woman, and this mayor -- fortunately I forget his name -- turned to me and said, "Oh, and whose secretary are you, dearie?"¹⁰ And I said, "I'm the mayor of San Jose, California." She added, “They weren't used to women being at the same table.” She repeated this story in several newspaper interviews, and frequently referred to the problem as the “Dick and Jane mentality.” After her first election she contacted Katharine Graham of the *Washington Post* and asked her advice on how to deal with the constant stream of sexist comments. Graham responded: “[you] she needed them as they need [you] her and to forget about it.” She took her advice and instead of dwelling on the criticism she focused on getting the job done. At the same time, she was always mindful of the responsibility she carried as the first woman in this position, and understood that her actions were being used to evaluate whether women were capable of political leadership. As the first female mayor in San Jose, she used her position to cultivate and encourage female candidates, helped them campaign through her endorsements, and promoted the appointment of women administrators in city government.¹¹

During her first election bid in 1974, she ran her campaign on the slogan “Make San Jose Better not Bigger,” and promised to deal with the urban sprawl confronting the city. She won by a small margin, but by her second election she won by a landslide victory, capturing 70% of the vote after a bitter campaign with fellow Councilman, Al Garza. She identified urban sprawl as the most significant issues she faced during her eight years in office. She also faced frequent hostility and gender discrimination from her male peers, but most of her problems had little to do with gender and more to do with planning and development. The city council consisted of 6 members and the mayor. She and the minority council members (Susanne Wilson and Jim Self) faced -off with the

¹⁰ Janet Gray Hayes, “The Bay Area’s Old Girls’ Network; Ex-SJ mayor got most from pioneering post,” *San Jose Mercury News*, February 17, 2002; Janet Gray Hayes, Oral History Interview, April 12, 2006, Interviewed by Danelle Moon, San Jose State University.

¹¹ “Chicago’s Jane Byrne et al prove the old male mayor ain’t what he used to be,” *People Magazine*, March 19, 1979; Gray Hayes, “Ex-SJ Mayor,” *San Jose Mercury News*, February 17, 2002.

“fearsome foursome”— Joe Colla, Al Garza, Larry Pegram, and David Runyon—who supported pro-growth and were in the pockets of developers.¹²

While urban sprawl and the environment dominated policy making during this time period, the city faced high crime rates, gang violence, heterosexual and gay community conflict, ERA, and comparable worth strikes. Gray Hayes tied her success to the connections she held with female organizations like the LWV, NOW, and the NWPC; the later two organizations played an important role in her election campaigns. Gray Hayes used publicity to advantage and made key appearances to draw attention to the issues, which served her well in her reelection bid. She succeeded in drawing national and international attention to San Jose as the “Feminist Capital of the world.” While she may have championed the notion of the “feminist capital” and served on U.S. Conference of Mayors Task Force for the ERA, and she was a strong advocate for comparable worth, she spent most of her time promoting slow-growth public policy, environmental issues, and balancing the budget.¹³

She served eight years as mayor of San Jose, and retired from political life in 1982. During her tenure she proved that women were more than capable in politics, and she earned the reputation as a pragmatic and tough politician. She also felt a heavy responsibility to excel, knowing that her success would lead to future opportunities for women. In her words: “ I felt...a ...heavy responsibility when I was the only woman on a board to do a good job so that they would appreciate what I was trying to do for the organization so that I could leave...with at least as many women or more than when I started.”¹⁴ As the first female mayor of San Jose, her success marked the beginning of an era of female politicians in the Bay Area.¹⁵

¹² Mayor Hayes’ meteoric rise to prominence,” SF Sunday Examiner & Chronicle, Jan. 1, 1978; “Mayor Hayes; Out to Pasture or off to the Races,” Harry Farrell, *California Today, The Magazine of the San Jose Mercury News*, March 30, 1980, 10-11; S.J. Council nears growth issue showdown,” San Jose Mercury News, July 23, 1978, pg. 1, 3A; “Her honor; San Jose Mayor fights urban sprawl in “feminist capital of United States,” The Arizona Republic, September 1, 1981, SL16; S.J. Council nears growth issue showdown,” San Jose Mercury News, July 23, 1978, 1 & 3a

¹³ Farrell, “Mayor Hayes; Out to Pasture or Off o the Races,” SJMN; Matthews, 193-196; Flammang, 166, 184-187.

¹⁴ Cited in Flammang, *Women’s Political Voice*, 187.

¹⁵ Ibid, 166; Farrell, “Mayor Hayes; Out to Pasture or Off o the Races,” SJMN; Rosalie Nicols, “S. J. Mayor Hayes turns in Gavel,” *Your Paper* (Published in Santa Clara County by Our Projects Inc.), Vol. 1, no. 9, December 22, 1982, p.3; Janet Gray Hayes Interview with Author.

Susanne Wilson

Susanne (Susie) Wilson earned the distinction as the third woman elected to the San Jose City Council. Similar to Janet Gray Hayes, she lived a classic middle class life as the wife of an IBM engineer, and held membership in a number of organizations, including the PTA, YWCA, and she became a key leader of the local branch of the NWPC and California Elected Women's Association for Education and Research (CEWAER). Wilson grew up in Gonzalez, Texas and her experience living under segregation had an enormous impact on her development as a social activist and later as an office holder.¹⁶

Shortly after moving to San Jose in 1960 Wilson joined the YWCA, one of most progressive and socially responsive organizations in the county. As the momentum of civil rights increased, the local YWCA worked hard to increase minority representation on it's board, which Wilson played a key role. From 1967-1970 Wilson served as the President of YWCA before running for city council. As Fran Smith author of the organization's history describe: "In 1973, at age 44, she ran for office for the San Jose City Council. She didn't have lifelong old-boy ties but she had feisty Texas charm, and her YW years taught her how to court power brokers, cut deals, and raise money," and the grassroots groups helped her work the precincts, knocked on doors, stuffed envelopes, and helped propel her into office."¹⁷

Typical of most of the women who entered early politics in this region, Wilson identified as a volunteer/homemaker, but she also became an outspoken feminist, though a very charming and diplomatic one. She has not lost her fire for politics, and though she has retired from public life, she is one of the primary political powerbrokers in San Jose. Ironically, Janet Gray Hayes did not initially endorse her for the city council because she felt that Wilson was too soft. Once elected, Gray Hayes fully supported her and the two became good friends and allies, though each had very different political styles. Reflecting on some of the differences, Wilson recalled that Gray Hayes was very methodical in how she approached decision-making on specific issues. In contrast, Wilson made clear that

¹⁶ Flammang, *Women in Politics*, 41-42; Matthews, 193-197;

¹⁷ Fran Smith, *Breaking Ground; The Daring Women of the YWCA in Santa Clara Valley, 1905-2005* (YWCA if Silicon Valley, printed by The Press, San Jose, California, 2005), 68-69.

all of her decisions were based on her core values, which focused on advancing the opportunities for women and minorities.

Janet Gray and I had very different styles. And she was really good at telling voters that this was policy and this was how you do things, and I remember one time we had an interview together, and she explained how she evaluated [policy] and she said I'm a League of Women Voters and I look at the issue and I just find the pros over here, and I find the cons over here, and I make what I hope is a wise decision. And I looked at her and said, that's not the way I do it, and a reporter joined in and I said, I have a commitment to certain things and they've got to fit into what my core values are. I'd like to open up the system for women and minorities, and so my position coming first is -- does it meet the core values that I have. So, I wasn't going to go and evaluate things."¹⁸

Newspaper accounts and constituent letters confirm Wilson's political conscience and core values to support issues that improved the lives of women, families, and minorities.

As a councilwoman Wilson also had to focus her energies on development, but when possible, she promoted gender equality. For example, she worked on the behalf of the YWCA to get the police to provide sensitivity training for police officers working with rape victims. Today the Police Department works collaboratively with the YWCA and the YWCA rape crisis center is one of the best organized in the county. Wilson also supported gay rights, and worked hard to address low-income housing and childcare issues.¹⁹ After serving two terms on the City Council and ending her final term as Vice Mayor, she won a seat on the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors (District 1); a position that she held from 1978-1990.

During Wilson's tenure on the Board of Supervisors, the "Feminist Capital" took on real meaning as more women won elections and were appointed to various government offices in the region. As a footnote, Iola Williams replaced Wilson on the council and earned the distinction as the first African American and minority women elected to the council. In less than two years following Wilson's tenure on the City Council, seven women were elected to the Council, representing an unprecedented female majority. Wilson became the second woman elected to the Board of Supervisors, and during her term of office, Zoe Lofgren (1980), Becky Morgan (1982) and Dianne Mckenna (1985) joined her on the Board, and Sally Reed (1982) served as County

¹⁸ Susanne Wilson Oral History, Interviewed by Danelle Moon, April 10, 2006, San Jose, California.

¹⁹ Matthews, 193-195.

Executive. Santa Clara County women made significant inroads into politics and into high-level professional positions, including Gail Fullerton, the first female president of San Jose State University. South Bay voters clearly accepted women as equals with men in the political realm. Zoe Lofgren put it well when she said: “Ronald Reagan won the election, but maybe the women in Santa Clara County won a lot more.” As Flammang demonstrated, the success of these women was striking compared to the national average. In Santa Clara County women represented the majority on the San Jose City Council and the Board of Supervisors, compared to the national average; 6% of women held county positions, while 13% served at that municipal level.²⁰

For the majority of female office holders, the Feminist Capital provided a venue to promote feminist issues from pay equity, rape counseling services, domestic violence, childcare and children’s shelters. The Board of Supervisors confronted all of these issues, as well other primary urban service issues. The board members voted as individuals, but they frequently worked together to support specific policies, and in a few circumstances the female majority united. The jail controversy, which pitted the Board of Supervisor’s against the County Sheriff who controlled the management of the jail-system, illustrates the power of female solidarity and control of county politics. The controversy began in the 1980s when the county jail was full beyond measure and the courts ordered the County to build a new facility. The County agreed that the system needed an overhaul, but they also faced serious budget cuts. In 1988, The Board of Supervisors challenged the Sheriff, resulting in a voter referendum through Measure A and F. Supervisor Wilson, Zoe Lofgren, and Dianne McKenna drafted Measure A to address the mismanagement of the County Sheriff in maintaining his budget. The Board pointed the Sheriff’s budget, which jumped 116%, but failed to address the increase the number of inmates (34%). Measure A proposed to change the County Charter and to transfer the operations of the jail to a Department of Corrections. The Sheriff’s union countered with Measure F and fought to control Sheriff control and jurisdiction of the jail system. McKenna, Wilson, and Lofgren personally funded and launched a publicity campaign to support Measure A. This publicity campaign focused on the responsibilities of the Board in maintaining

²⁰ Muriel Dobbin, “San Jose turns to female leadership,” *Dallas Times Herald*, November 23, 1980; “Iola Williams First Black council member,” *Almaden Cambrian Sun*, January 10, 1979. See also Flammang, *Political Women*, 53

spending priorities, which included balancing the budget, addressing social service issues, criminal justice and transportation. In one example they brought home some of the tough decisions they faced: “We face the homeless, the elderly, the sick. We respond to people who want additional services, we hear from angry commuters, and we are responsible for how our criminal justice system is run.”²¹ In the end, their ballot campaign paid off and Measure A passed. For Wilson and McKenna this event was one of their most memorable because it created a feeling of feminist solidarity, and rare experience in the larger scheme of policymaking in the county.²²

Leona Egeland-Siadek

Leona Egeland, the first woman to run as a Democrat in Santa Clara County earning her election in her right (not as widow serving out spouses term), served in the State Assembly from 1974-1980.²³ She completed her BA at the University of Arizona and her MA in science at SJSU. Upon completion of her MA she married Gil Egeland. During commencement she accepted her degree with young daughter Ilaan in tow. She spent the first few years working as full-time teacher, but with the birth of her second daughter Hylah, she found it impossible to work full-time work, and later had difficulty finding work.

Egeland came of age in a politically passive family of democrats; her father voted for Goldwater. Inspired by the work of Paul Ehrlich who wrote the *The Population Bomb*, Egeland joined the zero population growth movement and she became an active member and worked as a lobbyist with Planned Parenthood to promote legislation in Sacramento. Reflecting on the period dominated by images appliance advertisements, she stated we “... can’t... cheer the ad for Maytag washers and the women with eight children because that’s really nothing to cheer about at this point. So we needed to change our attitude. We needed to provide the legal means for people to control their own families; we need to provide education—you know, *that* kind of beginning radical.

²¹ Zoe Lofgren, Susanne Wilson, Dianne McKenna, “County jails: on trail; Yes on Measure A: Corrections department will save tax dollars.” SJMN May 22, 1988; Measure A Publicity Flyer, “Before you decide how to vote on the Jail, take a look at the issue from our point of view,” Supervisor Dianne McKenna, Supervisor Susanne Wilson, Supervisor Zoe Lofgren (1988).

²²

²³ “The California connection for politicians,” San Jose Mercury News August 19, 1980; Political women convene, pay tribute one of their own,” San Jose Mercury News, Sept. 14, 1980;.

Working as a lobbyist she developed a firm understanding of state politics and the legislative process, and became a well-known lobbyist, which positioned her to run for the 24th District assembly seat. She received the endorsements of Willie Brown, Marg Fong, and George Mascone. She walked the precincts in between taking her turn for the preschool carpool. As a young mother she faced very different challenges than the elder Gray Hayes, yet her campaign proved successful, and won against favorite Mayor Norman Mineta. Anchored by the success of Janet Gray Hayes, Egeland's victory helped move Santa Clara County into the national spotlight.

Reflecting on her success, she credits the work of women's organizations for supporting her three successful campaigns. When she won in 1974 she jokingly said that she won because she looked the least like President Nixon. While she benefited from the fall-out from Watergate, she was a direct beneficiary of new district elections and from a "careful grassroots effort led by women."²⁴

While many of the politicians and activists associated with NOW and worked towards the passage of the ER, the majority of South Bay women received community support from the YWCA, LWV, and NWPC. Egeland recalled that she relied on "an army of women" to support her campaign. (oral history transcript, pg. 17). While in office she remained true to her values and promoted legislation focused on women, from childcare, health care, family planning, abortion, conservation, honest government, anti-spanking in education, alcoholism and drug addiction. She also succeeded in changing the Assembly procedures to address women legislators as "Assemblywoman" vs. "Assemblyman."

Dianne McKenna

Dianne McKenna, a native of Pennsylvania, moved to the Silicon Valley in the 1960's. In 1977, she received her Master's Degree in Urban and Regional Planning from San Jose State University. In that same year, McKenna was elected to the Sunnyvale City Council, where she served until her 1984. When asked what the "Feminist Capital" meant to her, she pointed to Janet Gray Hayes. She did not see herself in this light, but in actuality she served as Mayor of Sunnyvale during the height of the Feminist Capital, and her

²⁴ "Remembrances of Things Past," *San Jose Mercury News*, August 11, 1991,

contributions to the County Board of Supervisors was indeed a result of the Feminist Capital.²⁵

Unlike the mayor of San Jose, the Sunnyvale mayor is not elected but appointed by the city council. McKenna served on the council less than 8 years before being asked to serve as the Mayor. She had fond memories of her time on the council and said that it was a lot of fun. In 1985 she successfully ran for the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors and served two terms (1985-1996). In 1985, the Board of Supervisors represented a population of over one million. In contrast Sunnyvale had a population base of 111,090. Moving from city politics to county government was a big step, but McKenna brought her experience in municipal government and her background in urban planning served her well. She worked on a number of planning committees that related to open-space issues and other master planning projects. She initiated recycling efforts as the Chair of the Solid Waste Commission of Santa Clara County, and in 1994 she led the General Plan Review Advisory Committee to complete its work of reviewing and updating land use plans and policies. She also led the successful merger of the *Congestion Management Agency* and the *Transit District Board*, which served as a guide for regional projects for the *Metropolitan Transportation Commission*. The cities and the county had to balance planning and development with the environmental concerns of the population. This is especially true at the county level, where the supervisors are charged with the responsibility to address the social and economic needs of the county. McKenna promoted child welfare and was a founding member of “Kids in Common”, a collaborative children's advocacy program, a member of the Board of Trustees for the *Children's Shelter*, and chair of the *Children and Youth Services Joint Conference Committee*.

In contrast to Gray Hayes and Wilson, McKenna never experienced any direct sexual discrimination while in office, but she recalled that a male colleague made a snide comment that the San Jose City Council was run by a bunch of housewives [referring to Mayor, Susan Hammer]. In response she made clear to her colleague that the majority of women in politics held jobs as well as were wives and mothers. She retorted: ““Wait a

²⁵ Dianne McKenna Papers Inventory, San Jose State University; Dianne McKenna Oral Interview, April 5, 2006.

minute. I don't hear you comment that you're a bunch of husbands, or the male on the council." ²⁶

A committed and confident feminist, McKenna believes that women have an important role to play in politics and that they bring different values and qualities to the political process. Congress would be a very different place if women held 50% of the positions, and her experience she found "...women...will take -- a difficult position and take a side of courage on an issue." She cited her work with Wilson and Lofgren on the jail issue as an example of women banding together to vote according to their conscience, when the two male members did not. "When push comes to shove...she said... I tend to find the women willing to stand up and say, "No, this is the right way to go, even though it was a difficult position." Yet, she also remarked that the focus on so-called "women's issues," such as education and healthcare, is only half of the picture, and that women who serve in municipal government also have to deal with urban growth, transportation, and the criminal justice system.²⁷

Susan Hammer

Susan Hammer has the distinction of serving as the second female mayor of San Jose. Hammer's background follows the same pattern as Gray Hayes, Wilson, and McKenna. A native of Southern California, she met her husband Phil Hammer while they were students at U.C. Berkeley. In 1960 they traveled to Washington DC to work for the Kennedy presidential campaign, and both worked in positions to promote the "New Frontier." Susan Hammer found a position working for the Peace Corps administration, while Phil Hammer worked for the Human Rights Commission. In 1964 they returned to San Jose to raise their family and settled into middle class life. Their experiences working for Civil Rights and the New Frontier provided an important foundation for their social and political work. While she raised three children, she worked on California Assemblymen, John Vasconcellos' first campaign in 1966, and from 1976-1980 she sat on the *County Juvenile Justice Commission* and served as president of the Board of the San Jose Museum of Art (while self-described as a house-wife). In 1978 Janet Gray

²⁶ Dianne McKenna Oral Interview

²⁷ Dianne McKenna Oral Interview.

Hayes, friend and neighbor, asked Hammer to serve as her co-chair for her reelection bid, and in 1980, she was encouraged to apply for a city council vacancy and was appointed. Elected in 1982, serving district 3, Hammer served as a council member and Vice-Mayor for two-terms. From 1990-1998, she became the second female mayor of San Jose, and would have continued except for turn-limits²⁸

Prior to running for mayor, Hammer studied the issues confronting the city, which included affordable housing, homelessness, gang violence, childcare and the arts. Hammer received important support from women, Hispanics, Asians, and blacks in her election bid, and she launched Project Diversity to promote minority representation boards and committees that reported to the city council. She received national attention for the city's "Greenline Initiative"—a growth-control policy and for her promotion of ethnic diversity. Glenna Matthews described Hammer as a visionary for her outreach to the Hispanic community, and for her sensitivity to issues of diversity. In 1998, Hammer described political philosophy :

open government "because we have nothing to hide": governing "by consensus, rather than by divisive politics; respect for people and embracement of diversity; a "fundamental commitment to investment, especially in our young people,"; and a desire to innovate "at every turn, which is intrinsic to the Silicon Valley culture."²⁹

During her tenure in office she left a lasting imprint on the arts and education in the city, most facilitated the formation and city support of the Repertory Theater and the merger of the San Jose State University Library and the San Jose Public Library. She also promoted youth programs that provided homework centers, after school programs, and created an anti-gang task force. At the national level, Hammer was appointed by President Clinton to serve as the first public official and first woman to chair the *Advisory Committee for Trade Policy and Negotiations* in 1994, and in 1995 at the beginning of her second term, was encouraged by President Clinton, Barbara Boxer, and Dianne Feinstein to run for Norman Mineta's congressional seat. Newspaper reports suggested

²⁸ Susan Hammer Papers, San Jose State University; Susan Hammer Oral Interview, July 11, 2006; Flammang, *Women in Politics*, 178.

²⁹ Barry Witt, "She Meant Business San Jose Mayor Leaves a Legacy of Growth, some of which can be credited to her focus on economic development," *San Jose Mercury News*, December 27, 1998, 1A; "The Beauty of a Greenline," *San Jose Mercury News*, November 14, 1996, 1B; Matthews, 216.

that she could potentially seek a state office seat, but in the end she stayed in San Jose and did not run for higher office. While flattered by the attention she received from Clinton and other high profile democrats, her commitment to a high quality family took precedent over a high-powered political career. Similar to Hayes, McKenna, and Wilson, she found her niche in local politics and did not want to have a bi-coastal life.³⁰

Blanca Alvarado

Prior to the 1990s the composition of the Feminist Capital was largely defined by white, middle-class, and college educated women. Iola Williams, the first female African American served on San Jose City Council from 1979 to 1990, and Hispanic, Blanca Alvarado served on the Council from 1981-1994, and retired from political office after serving three terms on the Board of Supervisors (1996-2006).

Alvarado's ties her trajectory into politics to her Hispanic family and community roots. Born in Cokedale, Colorado in 1930, Alvarado was the youngest of twelve siblings. Her father worked in the coal mines and became a leader in the local miners' union. Alvarado's father did not attend school past the third grade, but he taught himself to read and became the treasurer of the miners' union. Following the collapse of the mining industry in the 1940s, he saved enough money to move his large family of twelve to California, and after one season working for the McClay Ranch, was offered a job as the ranch foreman, which provided a stable family life that would not have been possible as migrant farm workers. While Alvarado and her eleven siblings worked the fields in the summer, her parents made sure that their children went to school. Alvarado attended San Jose High School and helped form (1948-1949) Club Tapatío, a Latino social club, which organized food and clothing drives for the poor. In 1953 she married José Alvarado, a very prominent Latino leader (23 years her senior) and popular radio personality. Alvarado used his radio show as a platform to promote civic participation and higher education in the community. He also talked about the issues that oppressed the

³⁰ Matthews, 171, 216-217, 252-253; Flammang, *Women in Politics*, 173, 178, 173-184, 187, and 249-50; Nick Anderson, "Hammer to Lead Key Trade Panel, May 10, 1994, SJMN, pg. 1A; "Clinton Nudging Hammer—Mineta Seat: San Jose Mayor Urged to Run as Campbell Announces House Bid," SJMN, September 15, 1995, 1A-3-4; Mary Ann Ostrum, "Hammer Eyes State Options Analysis: S.J. Mayor would need Millions, Increased Name Recognition," SJMN, September 21, 1995, 1B; Susan Hammer Oral History, July 11, 2006.

community, which led to accusations of communism, and later cancellation of his contract because he refused to give up his political activities on air.³¹

During the Civil Rights era the Latino community radicalized and pressured the white establishment to share city resources and demanded access to politics. In 1970 Hispanics represented 22% of the population. A 1973 Rand report pointed out the disparity between the minority and white populations. In contrast to the pristine neighborhoods in Willow Glen and the Rose Garden, the Hispanic neighborhoods were poor, dilapidated, which created a system of defacto segregation. Despite the lack of Hispanic representation in city politics, the War on Poverty campaign brought federal funds to the city to address the problems in the barrio, and the city received Model Cities funds to make significant improvements. As Terry Christensen noted, these programs did little to improve the blighted neighborhoods, but the community activism that resulted from this program produced a new generation of minority leaders like Alvarado. At the same time, Cesar Chavez mobilized the Latino community to support farm workers' rights. The convergence of Civil Rights issues directly influenced Alvarado's community activism. In one example she helped organize the Spanish speaking community to force the local Catholic Church to add a Spanish mass, but she also worked with Chavez and other leaders and demanding "fair representation, fair housing, and reforms in police practices." Later she and her children supported Chavez during his various hunger strikes through organized community vigils.³²

Commenting on her political trajectory, she said "my arrival in politics in the 1980s came from standing on the shoulders of those people who influenced me." Namely her father, mother, and husband shaped her values and goals to address social, economic and political justice for the Latino community. In 1965 she divorced her husband and raised her five children on her own. During this time period she was a welfare recipient, where she received medical benefits and food stamps. Without these benefits she could not have accomplished what she did, and later worked for the welfare office. Alvarado struggled to make ends meet as she raised her family, and unlike all of the other women in "Feminist Capital" she did not have a spouse to help support her family while she

³¹ Blanca Alvarado Oral History, August __, 2006; "A Person of Great Faith': Blanca Alvarado's Story." *El Andar: Voces*, March 1996.

³² Blanca Alvarado Oral History; Trounstein and Christensen, *Movers and Shakers*, 100-103.

worked for very low wages as a Councilwoman. Lacking a second income, she mortgaged her house twice and worked part-time in her tax business, while working on the city council.³³

Alvarado's entrance into politics evolved from her community activism, which included service as president of the local chapter of the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA). Gray Hayes recognized her leadership and appointed her to serve on the Bicentennial Committee and the Charter Review Committee in the late 1970s. By 1978 movement was underfoot by a growing coalition of minority, feminist, labor and neighborhood groups to change the city charter, and introduce district elections. The Latino community was particularly outspoken by the lack of representation of their community. The voters agreed and the city charter was revised, which increased the number of council members from six to eleven, thus new doors opened to women and minorities to pursue elective office; Alvarado directly benefited from this seed change.³⁴

From 1981-1994 she served as the first Latina on the city council, and in 1996 she was appointed to serve out Zoe Lofgren's unexpired term, and in 1998 she became the first Latina chairperson in the county's history. True to her community roots she spearheaded the clean up of "Poco Way", one of the worst slums in San Jose. Reflecting on this project, she said that "Poco Way" is a good example of why politics matters you can use the system to improve people's lives." Throughout her 28 years in office, she supported issues, sat on committees, and drafted policy to support quality family life in the county. She spearheaded the establishment of the Office of Women's Advocacy in 1998, which promotes programs to encourage women and girls to succeed at all levels, co-chaired the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Network, founded the Early Childhood Development Collaborative, and supported the Girls for Change 2003. She also worked on restorative justice projects, juvenile detention reform, drug rehabilitation, domestic violence, and low-income housing.³⁵

In October of 2005, she summed up her philosophy of government during a celebration marking her 25 years of public service:

³³ Blanca Alvarado Oral History

³⁴ Blanca Alvarado Oral History; Trounstein & Christensen, *Movers and Shakers*, 103-106.

³⁵ Blanca Alvarado Oral History; Blanca Alvarado Biography, Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors, 2nd District, retrieved on 9/24/2006 from <http://www.blancaalvarado.org/bio/bio.html>.

“Those same democratic traditions, inculcated in me by my coal miner father, encouraged me to seek a seat on the City Council in 1980 and when I took office in 1981, while I was not given a road map to governance, I quickly learned that the politics we do reflect ones ideals and who we are, and I have tried to remain faithful to a past that has provided me with a sense of purpose - with a firm belief that social transformation is not the work of a day - that it is not a task for those seeking quick gratification - that social problem solving is not only slow-it is often untidy, and that purposeful social change occurs through a long and disorderly process with obstacles along the way.”³⁶

Conclusion:

Santa Clara County rightfully earned the distinction as the “Feminist Capital”. The groundswell of female office holders and female activists from the 1970s and into the 1990s is an important chapter in the larger history of modern feminism. Clearly a number of factors from location, middle-class affluence, higher education, urban expansion and a commitment to a clean and healthy environment produced a remarkable cadre of female activists and office holders. In 1980 Santa Clara County had one the highest median incomes in the nation, had over 6000 PhD’s, and had one the highest voter registration and voter turn-out, at 71% and 79% respectively. The Silicon Valley and the success of the Feminist Capital during this time period laid the groundwork for female participation at all levels of government. The legacy of this time period has created an environment where women play a direct role in policy making through a variety of organizations. Today, women do not hold a majority as office holders in this region, but they dominate as grassroots activists, serve on a variety of city and county committees, including the Commission on the Status of Women, and all of the programs that under gird social services. The “Feminist Capital” underscores the significance of feminist grassroots activism and their role in shaping the American political process for good.

³⁶ Blanca Alvarado, “Blanca’s 25 Year Public Service Celebration,” retrieved on 9/24/2006 from Santa Clara Board of Supervisors, Blanca Alvarado Speeches, <http://www.blancaalvarado.org/speech/speech.html>.