

The 50th Anniversary of the Election that Changed San Jose Politics Forever
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2028 will mark the 50th anniversary of a movement that changed San Jose city politics forever. San Jose voters approved a charter amendment that mandated the election of city council members by district in November 1978. Previously, council elections had been at-large (or citywide) but as the city grew that meant each council member represented hundreds of thousands of people. Some parts of the city—especially the Eastside—came to feel disenfranchised, leading to the movement for district elections.

The initial impetus for the change came from the Eastside and the Latino and African American communities out of concern about police/community relations and perceptions of police brutality. Suspicious shootings of minority citizens by police in the 1970s brought the issue to a head when the at-large elected council seemed unresponsive, ignoring the concerns of the Eastside. Latino and black community leaders demanded police reform and direct representation on the city council and the Confederacion de la Raza Unida and other groups launched a movement to make the council more representative and responsive by shifting to council elections by district rather than at-large.

District election supporters sought to assure representation on the city council for all San Jose neighborhoods, to broaden the spectrum of people running for office, reduce the cost of campaigns and facilitate grass-root campaigns. Between 1950 and 1975, 74 percent of the city council members had lived in just two neighborhoods. Until the change to district elections, most council members were businessmen or attorneys. San Jose had grown so large that candidates without a lot of money and the support of the conservative, pro-growth *San Jose Mercury News* stood little chance of winning. A candidate running in a district election, however, would need to reach fewer voters and could rely more on volunteers and less costly advertising and newspaper support.

The supporters of districting launched a petition campaign aimed at putting their proposal to the voters through an initiative to amend the city charter. Although not part of San Jose's political mainstream, district elections supporters gained broad backing. In 1972, the mayor and city council appointed a charter review committee to study district elections among other charter changes. The charter review committee, made up of establishment attorneys, business leaders, and moderate community activists, recommended a change to district elections, along with a San Francisco-style strong mayor form of government. The city council voted to put the proposals of both the community and the charter review committee on the 1973 ballot, but then the old guard, including six former mayors, pressured the council into dropping the proposals. Feeling betrayed, the districting advocates tried to revive their petition drive, but failed to gather enough signatures by the deadline. The districting movement, demoralized, faded away, although only temporarily.

Meanwhile, a new political force was emerging in the city: neighborhood groups. During the years of rapid growth, hundreds of thousands of new residents had settled in San Jose. But the growth that brought them to San Jose stretched city services thinly and infrastructure construction, including schools and highways, had not kept up with growth. The new arrivals complained about police and fire response times in the sprawling city, having their kids on double-session in schools housed in temporary buildings, traffic congestion and lack of nearby

parks. In 1974, their concerns led to the election of Mayor Janet Gray Hayes and council candidates supporting controlled-growth.

Residents, old and new, also organized neighborhood groups around issues. In new parts of town, they organized because of what they viewed as inadequate services, while older neighborhoods got together because they felt neglected and their services had declined. By 1978, San Jose boasted 118 neighborhood and homeowner groups—one for every 5000 residents, a high ratio for such a new city.

Between 1974 and 1976, the movement for district council representation was given impetus by two city programs launched by Mayor Hayes and the new city council. “Project 75” in 1975 brought citizens together to plan capital and infrastructure improvements for their neighborhoods, while General Plan 76 in 1976 gave them a say in long-range land-use planning. Community participation in both was organized by “planning areas” which paralleled what would later become electoral districts. By attempting to draw citizens into the process and gain their support, the city introduced activists to one another and helped build district identities, generating leaders with a citywide network.

Many of San Jose’s new neighborhood activists and organizations felt as neglected as the city’s Latino community did, having never had a council representative who lived in or even seemed familiar with their areas. Many were also vehemently anti-growth and believed that the high cost of citywide campaigns gave developers undue influence through campaign contributions. They proved ready recruits when the district election movement was revived.

The event that precipitated that revival was another police shooting of a Latino community member. Frustrated again by council inaction, the district activists went back to work. This time they carefully cultivated alliances with a wide spectrum of groups and interests. They easily won the support of established minority organizations as well as the Central Labor Council, the umbrella organization for all the city’s unions. The city’s emerging women’s groups added their endorsements, knowing that women would have a better chance of winning office against well-funded, established incumbents. And many neighborhood activists jumped on the districting bandwagon.

While some advocates of districting were lining up the support of such groups for a possible initiative to amend the city charter, others participated in another council-appointed charter review committee. The committee was created by a mayor seeking to strengthen the office of mayor, a city council hoping for better pay, and a city manager who wanted to loosen up the civil service system. But the committee chose to focus on district elections and in May of 1978, they took their proposal to the city council. The community coalition in favor of district elections set aside their own plan to rally support for the charter review committee’s proposal. With support of Mayor Hayes, the council voted 6-1 to put the plan on the November 1978 ballot.

During the campaign a broad and formidable coalition supporting district elections emerged, including minority community groups, neighborhood activists, environmentalists, unions, women’s groups, many elected officials and much of the city’s Democratic party leadership. Opponents were fewer in number, but included members of the city’s old guard, the Chamber of Commerce, the *Mercury-News* and the city’s powerful builders and developers, who provided most of the funds for the anti-districting campaign.

On election day, the voters approved district elections with 52 percent voting yes and 48 percent voting no. The strongest support came from minority and liberal areas and from the most

recently developed parts of the city; opposition was concentrated in the city's most conservative and affluent areas which had been well represented with the at-large system.

The first actual elections by district were held in 1980 and most of the hopes and goals of the district election proponents came to fruition. Campaigns were much cheaper, with winning candidates spending an average of \$25,800 (as compared to over \$100,000 for the last at-large races). The composition of the city council changed dramatically. A majority of the newly elected council were women. One of the women was Latina and another was black, the first minorities to gain seats on the council by direct election rather than council appointment. Several neighborhood activists were also elected. Every San Jose neighborhood had a directly elected representative.

District elections have continued to expand representation on the San Jose City Council from San Jose's diverse population. District elections led in subsequent years to the election of the city's first council members of Chinese, South Asian, Vietnamese and Puerto Rican ancestry and a near majority of Latino representatives. District election boundaries empowered communities of color and have continued to foster grass-roots campaigns. Within the structure of city government, each district is now considered in the adoption of the city budget and program activities. The composition of many city commissions has been expanded to allow for district representation to assure that all neighborhoods are heard in the development of city policy.

San Jose was ahead of its time relative to other communities. Decades after the adoption of district elections in San Jose, districting has come to other cities, either by choice, court-order or activism, to ensure under-represented groups have a voice in government.

District representation was a movement that changed San Jose politics forever, expanding representation on the city council to include all parts of the city and its people. We shouldn't forget the significance of this change or the communities that brought it about. As we approach the 50th anniversary of the approval of district elections, San Jose should celebrate the unity and inclusiveness that district elections fostered and secured for our community.