

## Women in Long Beach Politics

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Represented at Last

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The history of women's representation in the Long Beach government has come in cycles and waves since the 1880s. Although local government had primarily been a boy's club, women in Long Beach have nevertheless long advocated for their rights and the well-being of their local community. Furthermore, countless women in Long Beach's history have helped deconstruct sexist traditions in government and fought to empower women. While they did not always have political power, women in Long Beach remained active and engaged in the local community. Much of the early history of female representation traces to early women's clubs like the Ebell of Long Beach, which began in 1896 and grew to over a thousand members by the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> During the Progressive Era, women became more active in public spaces, especially through their activities in women's organizations. Furthermore, women continued to gain power through a 1911 state ballot in which male voters throughout California supported women's right to vote in California before women earned the right nationally. Every precinct in Long Beach voted to support women's right to vote, establishing its early support of women's political power.

Long Beach continued its early streak of supporting women's political power by electing its first female official, Myrtelle Gunsul, to be city auditor in 1919, the same year the United States Congress passed the 19th Amendment allowing women to vote nationwide. Gunsul had served as Deputy City Auditor and capitalized on the support of Long Beach's recently enfranchised women voters, thus easily defeating three male candidates. As city auditor, Gunsul proved to be meticulous and ethical. She conducted her audits thoroughly, even investigating a mere 18-cent discrepancy for months to ensure the safety of taxpayer money.<sup>2</sup> As a result of her integrity, she remained the only elected official to maintain her position after the entire city council was recalled in 1934. She hoped her career in city government would inspire other

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<sup>1</sup> The History of Ebell Club Pamphlet (date unknown).

<sup>2</sup> Haley Munguia, "100 years later, tales of Long Beach's first woman to hold elective office stay alive," *Press-Telegram* (March 2019).

women to enter local politics too and that more people would recognize the wider societal benefits of having more women in politics.<sup>3</sup>

Gunsul was re-elected over ten times and retired in 1951, breaking down a significant barrier to women in local politics and maintaining the longest record of continuous service in Long Beach's history. Shortly after Myrtelle Gunsul retired in 1951, Long Beach welcomed its first female member of the city council in 1954: Ruth Bach. Despite its early support for women's political power, female representation in Long Beach politics quickly slowed down after Myrtelle Gunsul and Ruth Bach. California strangely encountered similar situations statewide, with Congresswoman Yvonne Braithwaite Burke remarking in 1976 that women's representation in government had decreased since the 1920s.<sup>4</sup> While the State Assembly had five female members in 1925, California only had three in 1975. Much of the local representation for women halted during these decades in between as women's rights seemingly retreated. A substantial amount of the general population thought women still primarily belonged in domestic settings and saw local government as a realm for men, as American culture prioritized nuclear families and traditional gender roles.

However, women remained active in their communities through involvement in Long Beach volunteer groups. For example, Winifred Campbell founded The Rick Rackers of Long Beach in 1942 by Winifred Campbell as an auxiliary of the nonprofit group Assistance League of Long Beach, recruiting young women to aid servicemen on Terminal Island. They shifted their attention to local matters after the war ended and promoted girls' opportunities through volunteering and managing college scholarship programs, requiring 72 hours of service annually by 1967.<sup>5</sup> The Long Beach branch of the American Association of University Women, founded

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<sup>3</sup> Munguia.

<sup>4</sup> "BURKE SEES 76 AS IMPORTANT YEAR," *The Now Times* (July 1976).

<sup>5</sup> Mrs Don G. Gill, "Rick Rackers," *Rick Rack Reporter* (1966-1967).

in 1881, similarly supported local women's education by awarding them scholarships for upper-division or graduate-level studies.<sup>6</sup> Aiming to service a slightly older demographic, the Long Beach Day Nursery was developed by college-educated women from Bixby Knolls in 1912 to offer licensed childcare for working-class women of color. These organizations not only illuminate how women created communities and resources for other women but also how they formed the foundation for later feminist political groups by building women's leadership skills and education.

While women's organizations prioritized fellow women, many of their activities focused on improving Long Beach as a whole. The Long Beach branch of the League of Women Voters, founded in 1920 to educate women on legislation and encourage them to participate in political affairs, became greatly involved in various community affairs - whether through action programs, voter information services, or as individuals. The League of Women Voters noticeably became active in issues like racial equality in Long Beach, supporting issues like desegregating neighborhoods. For example, they aided in funding the Long Beach Fair Housing Foundation to help eliminate discrimination against African Americans in housing during the 1960s. Likewise, they also participated in the "We Like Our Neighbors" movement during the early 1960s when African Americans began moving to the west side of Long Beach, leading realtors to encourage white residents to flee. This led to a group of white residents posting "We Like Our Neighbors" signs outside of their homes to challenge racism in their neighborhood.<sup>7</sup> While women may have not led these movements, participation from the League of Women Voters demonstrates that many women in Long Beach have long been concerned with aiding their ethnic neighbors as well.

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<sup>6</sup> Mrs Edward E. Dwyer, "American Association of University Women," *Rick Rack Reporter* (1966-1967).

<sup>7</sup> *Citizens Take Action* (1981).

## Feminist Progress

Women did not make significant progress in Long Beach politics until the 1970s. During this era, the organizations dedicated to women's empowerment significantly pushed for more women in politics. Although many of these organizations, such as the League of Women Voters and the American Association of University Women, were founded as early as the 1880s, the national rise of second-wave feminist politics sparked significant passion for women's political empowerment in the 1970s. In addition to seeking broader societal and legal changes, these organizations often had local chapters dedicated to servicing their local communities by addressing feminist issues such as gender discrimination and economic inequality. The Long Beach chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW), founded in 1966, held workshops to raise feminist consciousness among issues like sexual assault and economic opportunities.<sup>8</sup> Their advocacy also led to more services for women in the city, such as a city-funded rape crisis hotline in 1977.<sup>9</sup>

They additionally demanded more female empowerment in local government, pushing for more representation in elected officials and more action on feminist issues. NOW often endorsed candidates running for local offices, prioritizing the significance of women in office. When City Councilwoman Renee Simon ran for state senate in 1976, *The NOW Times* endorsed her as a long-standing supporter of civil rights activist dedicated to issues such as childcare, reproductive rights, and uplifting women and minorities into high positions alongside her.<sup>10</sup> They likewise admired how Simon appointed women to staff and manage her campaign. However, groups such as NOW considered electing feminists, including men, more essential than just electing women. The Long Beach chapter conducted interviews during the 1974 electoral season,

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<sup>8</sup> "Calendar," *NOW Long Beach Chapter Newsletter* (May 1976).

<sup>9</sup> "Rape crisis hotline receives funding," *The NOW Times* (August 1977).

<sup>10</sup> "Endorsement: 31st State Senate District," *The NOW Times* (July 1976).

ranking State Senate and California State Assembly candidates on how closely they aligned with feminist values like childcare.<sup>11</sup> Men compromised many of the highest scores from all parties. Their campaigns did not always lead to immediate success, but feminist activism led many political figures to prioritize women's issues more.

Although feminist organizations like NOW greatly aided women and feminist issues in Long Beach, individual organizations could not attain their goals on their own. Feminist groups frequently collaborated to consolidate political power. For instance, representatives from the Long Beach chapters of NOW, AAUW, League of Women Voters, Young Women's Christian Association, and Federally Employed Women proposed a resolution to the Long Beach City Council in 1976. The women's coalition asked that the city council make greater strides toward proportional representation by actively seeking women to fill new positions as they opened. Women's groups often received support from other local organizations that sought to achieve progress for all residents of Long Beach. NOW's Overview of Women's Rights Workshop in 1976, addressing employment discrimination and lesbian rights, garnered co-sponsorship from both the American Civil Liberties Union and the California Home Economics Association.<sup>12</sup>

While women's groups primarily prioritized feminist goals, they often fought against racial discrimination as well. In contrast to earlier women's groups, groups such as NOW focused more on intersectional issues. NOW had dedicated task forces to minority women, with co-chairpersons Charlotte Benowitz and Clara M. Jones arguing that women of color suffered from both sexism and racism.<sup>13</sup> Thus, women of color could not be fully freed from systemic oppression unless white feminists actively fought against racism and helped lift ethnic minorities. Long Beach NOW put these thoughts into action by supporting labor movements led

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<sup>11</sup> "How do the candidates rank on feminist issues?" *NOW Long Beach Chapter Newsletter* (May 1974).

<sup>12</sup> "An overview of women's rights," *NOW Long Beach Chapter Newsletter* (April 1976).

<sup>13</sup> "Minority women's task force," *The NOW Times* (September 1976).

by Mexican Americans, from the Farrah Workers Strike that demanded better working conditions for thousands of Mexican women manufacturing clothes to the joining boycotts spearheaded by United Farm Workers.<sup>14</sup><sup>15</sup> By collaborating with racial minority advocacy groups, feminist groups saw a mutual interest in challenging economic and political dynamics that only served a privileged few of Long Beach's residents.

Women's groups also held the Long Beach government accountable for their lack of progress on affirmative action, encompassing more workplace equality for women and ethnic minorities. NOW threatened a class action suit against the city for failing to recruit an affirmative action coordinator despite a two-year California law and over 2000 applications in 1975.<sup>16</sup> They urged the city to hire an affirmative action coordinator as quickly as possible to ensure that women and minorities could be recruited for more positions. Long Beach then hired an affirmative action officer named Henry Taboada, who highlighted in 1976 that statistics regarding the city's workforce found that women, especially women of color, were underutilized. Noticeably, only 19.7% of the city's 4,471 full-time employees were women. 5.2% of women held official or administrative jobs and the city employed no women in skilled labor. African Americans comprised even less of the city force, consisting of only 14.2%, and mainly worked in service maintenance. While representation in city employees slowly increased after Taboada's hiring, groups such as NOW continued to pressure the city government to challenge stereotypical gendered and racial employment practices.

New York native Renee Simon moved to Long Beach with her husband in the 1960s. She had been a member of the League of Women Voters since her days at a small all-women's

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<sup>14</sup> "Farah Workers Strike ends," *NOW Long Beach Chapter Newsletters* (April 1974).

<sup>15</sup> "NOW supports United Farm Workers," *NOW Long Beach Chapter Newsletter* (August 1974).

<sup>16</sup> "NO AFFIRMATIVE ACTION OFFICER IN LONG BEACH," *NOW Long Beach Chapter Newsletter* (January 1975).

college in Long Island, where she received a degree in chemistry, and during her graduate studies at Stanford. Her membership in the League taught her the significance of being involved in politics and the power women could have as a collective force. As a result, she saw the comparatively smaller size of Long Beach as an opportunity to become involved in the local community. A mother to small children, Simon became active in co-op nursery programs throughout the city and eventually became the program's director. She also developed Friends of the Libraries to support learning and city librarians throughout Long Beach. These efforts led her to form many connections throughout Long Beach's numerous neighborhoods.<sup>17</sup>

Simon's League of Women Voters membership eventually inspired her to join Long Beach's political community herself. One of the league's many programs involved observing the city council and sitting during their meetings. While observing, Simon realized she could improve on what was being done and decided to run for city council. She reached out to another woman in Los Angeles serving on the city council, Pat Russell, who commented on the difficulties of running as a woman. Russell even remarked that many only voted for her because the name "Pat" seemed gender-ambiguous and thus mistook her for a man. Simon was no stranger to gender discrimination in the workforce, especially in her previous career as a chemist. Although she had a master's degree in biochemistry from Stanford University, firms rejected her for being a woman. Simon further encountered many obstacles regarding her gender during her bid for the city council. People often asked how she would balance motherhood and her career, although Simon noted that she heard this question less than later female candidates since her children were already slightly older and more independent. Many voters were apprehensive that

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<sup>17</sup> Renee Simon, interview by Suzie Price, August 16, 2018, recording, Historical Society of Long Beach Collection.



Simon would aim for higher political positions and promised to vote for her on the condition she would not pursue greater ambitions.<sup>18</sup>

The *Press-Telegram* newspaper posed another obstacle to Simon's campaign. Although each of the nine districts nominated their city council candidates during this time, the entire city voted for the city council. Thus, candidates needed strong name recognition throughout the city to win a seat on the city council. The main method of obtaining name recognition was receiving the *Press-Telegram's* endorsement, as Long Beach generally trusted the newspaper and relied on its recommendations. Thus, candidates who did not politically align with the newspaper often faced tremendous difficulty in winning elected positions. Simon, an outspoken feminist, knew that she could not earn the *Press-Telegram's* endorsement. Thus, she had to rely on the connections she had formed through her previous community work in co-op nurseries and libraries to earn votes. Simon's campaign fundraised about \$25,000 from generous donors who believed in her vision for Long Beach, leading to her victory in 1972.<sup>19</sup>

Simon's difficulties with sexism continued during her time in the city council. She felt unwelcome when she initially joined the city council. Other than the city clerk and librarian, traditionally female roles, no other woman had a position in the administration. In addition to her being one of the few women, Simon found that her coworkers found her strong personality difficult to work with. A friend even told Simon that the city manager had warned department heads not to speak to her unless someone else was around. Thus, she had to learn how to work in the sexist council parameters to pass policy effectively. If Simon had ideas, she had to ask someone else to present the idea on her behalf as she knew it would be automatically rejected if it came from Simon herself.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Renee Simon, interview by Suzie Price, August 16, 2018, recording, Historical Society of Long Beach Collection.

<sup>19</sup> Renee Simon, interview by Suzie Price, August 16, 2018, recording, Historical Society of Long Beach Collection.

<sup>20</sup> Renee Simon, interview by Suzie Price, August 16, 2018, recording, Historical Society of Long Beach Collection.

Despite these difficulties, Simon successfully passed major legislation. For instance, she developed El Dorado Park, the largest in Long Beach, and convinced the city and voters to support a ten-year property tax increase to fund the park's building. Simon also found major allies in Tom Clark and James Wilson, the first African American elected to office. Simon and Wilson often sat with the city manager to further push for diverse representation in the city council, demanding that women and ethnic minorities have opportunities outside of stereotypical roles. Simon successfully convinced the police department to drop requirements that women and minorities had difficulties meeting, such as a minimum height of 5'10". She also persuaded the Long Beach Junior Lifeguards to allow girls into their program. For her achievements for women's rights in Long Beach, the city's NOW chapter named her "Woman of the Year" in 1976.<sup>21</sup>

Women ~~also~~ gained more significant representation in other realms of city government during the 1970s as well. For instance, former City Councilwoman Gerrie Schipske began her long career in city government as a city coordinator in 1977. City manager John Dever recruited both Schipske and Sherry Suttles, an African American woman, to manage major projects with a staff of 6-7 people. She identified this era, with Dever's support for women in city government, as a significant moment of transformation for Long Beach. Although Schipske often faced hardships as a woman, she noted that Suttles had an even more difficult experience due to experiencing racism as an African American as well. Schipske had worked in the CIA and as Congresswoman Shirley Pettis' press secretary before joining city government, where she stood out as one of the few women in politics. She furthermore faced intense difficulties throughout her career as a closeted lesbian, especially during her time working for the federal government in

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<sup>21</sup> "Endorsement: 31st StateSenate District, *The NOW Times* (July 1976).

DC. In contrast, she felt far less scrutinized for her sexuality in Long Beach where nobody pried into her private life, even during her later service as an out lesbian on city council.<sup>22</sup>

## Backlash Against Feminism

Although Long Beach women achieved several victories throughout the 1970s, a moral majority that felt uncomfortable with feminism persisted. Women themselves did not always feel comfortable with female leaders, as evidenced through Renee Simon's experience on city council with a female secretary who explicitly expressed feeling uncomfortable having a female boss.<sup>23</sup> Gerrie Schipske shared similar experiences working in the finance department in the late 1970s, remarking that the 103 women she had been placed in charge with did not want to be under her supervision.<sup>24</sup>

The city did not always support women's issues, such as funding the Long Beach Women's Community Center in 1976. The center had served over 1500 women through free workshops, task forces, and newsletters and received numerous commendations from groups such as the Long Beach Mental Health Association for aiding women. Thus, the community asked for a \$4,000 grant from the city to help fund its services. This grant was further supported by women's groups, such as NOW and AAUW, and more general organizations, such as Southwest California Synod. Nonetheless, five members of the city council voted against funding the center. The opposition, led by Eunice Sato, believed the center served women well but refused to vote in support as they believed the center had been involved with the women's liberation movement and the ERA.

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<sup>22</sup> Gerrie Schipske, interview by Karen Harper, March 16, 2024, recording, Historical Society of Long Beach Collection.

<sup>23</sup> Renee Simon, interview by Suzie Price, August 16, 2018, recording, Historical Society of Long Beach Collection.

<sup>24</sup> Gerrie Schipske, interview by Karen Harper, March 16, 2024, recording, Historical Society of Long Beach Collection.

Long Beach's failed attempt to create a Status of Women's Commission illustrates another instance of the continued hesitation regarding feminist progress in the city. Renee Simon initially suggested the commission in 1975 after attending an The United Nations Conference on the Status of Women in Mexico.<sup>25</sup> The commission would serve women in Long Beach by listening to their concerns and assessing issues of gender equality. However, the commission was met with hesitation as none of Simon's fellow council members initially supported the idea. The council further stalled the issue by stating they had to review all existing commissions before they could establish a new one. It took months for the city council to create a planning committee that would survey women across Long Beach about what needs they felt the city should meet.<sup>26</sup> When John Dever became city manager in 1977, he encouraged Councilwoman Eunice Sato, who chaired the Human Relations Commission, to seriously consider supporting the commission as he felt it was important to the city.<sup>27</sup> Dever put Gerrie Schipske, who at the time worked as a citizen coordinator for the city, in charge of further pushing the issue through. The women's commission garnered additional support from 33 women's organizations including the League of Women Voters, NOW, and AAUW.<sup>28</sup> Several of the male members of the city council indicated that they would vote in support of the proposal as well.

Despite having support from significant organizations and various councilmembers, the public reacted to the issue with immense backlash. More right-wing residents stormed through a local feminist bookstore, Sojourner's, and claimed creating the commission would "invite swarms of lesbians into the city."<sup>29</sup> Long Beach citizens even went to the state senate to protest

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<sup>25</sup> "Endorsement: 31st StateSenate District," *The NOW Times* (July 1976).

<sup>26</sup> "For Long Beach- a commission on the status of women?" *The NOW Times* (July 1976).

<sup>27</sup> Gerrie Schipske, interview by Karen Harper, March 16, 2024, recording, Historical Society of Long Beach Collection.

<sup>28</sup> "Long Beach Women's Commission stymied in committee," *The NOW Times* (July 1978).

<sup>29</sup> Gerrie Schipske, interview by Karen Harper, March 16, 2024, recording, Historical Society of Long Beach Collection.

the women's commission. The conservative Sato, who had a prior history of voting against feminist and LGBT issues, decided to vote against the women's commission and called it too political. As a result of her vote, NOW's Long Beach Media Task Force scathingly awarded Sato their second-ever HA (Horses' Ass) award and described her as an ardent anti-feminist who voted against women's issues whenever possible.<sup>30</sup> NOW additionally cited Sato's vocal opposition to funding the Long Beach Women's Community Center as another example of her more conservative policies regarding women.

The 1978 local elections led to a major shift in women's politics in Long Beach. Renee Simon lost her seat after serving two terms as councilwoman, despite earning endorsements from various city employee associations, minority organizations, and local newspapers.<sup>31</sup> The *NOW Times* claimed that Simon lost her election as a result of the right-wing backlash against her vocal support of the Women's Commission and ERA.<sup>32</sup> Noted feminist Edith Pollach, who had co-founded the Women's Community Center, also lost her election for city council in the first district. Like Simon, Pollach had earned various endorsements from various organizations like the National Association of Social Workers, the California State University - Long Beach chapter of United Professors of California, and the LB Central Democratic Club. The women who remained in high-ranking positions often held more conservative viewpoints. For example, Eunice Sato served as mayor from 1980-1982 and remained in the city council until 1986. Jan Hall, who defeated Simon in the third district, also ran as a conservative housewife who was heavily involved in church. Hall served on the city council until 1990. Much like the gap between the initial support for women in government in the 1910s and the feminist resurgence in

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<sup>30</sup> "The Long Beach Media Task Force presents its 2nd 'HA' award," *The NOW Times* (August 1977).

<sup>31</sup> "Woman of the year recipient loses council seat," *The NOW Times* (July 1978).

<sup>32</sup> "Woman of the year recipient loses council seat," *The NOW Times* (July 1978).

the 1970s, the retreat away from progressive, feminist policy marked another cycle in women's representation in Long Beach.

## The Intersectionality of Women in Politics

Building upon some of the intersectional feminist movements in the 1970s, the 1990s saw a greater push for diverse women and women of color in city government. Much of the city government during 1990 still lacked strong gender and ethnic balance, despite women like Renee Simon and Eunice Sato occupying powerful positions in prior decades. Gender discrimination continued throughout Long Beach. Candidate Tonia Reyes Uranga's stepfather told her that if she successfully became elected in the 1994 election, women would dominate the city council.<sup>33</sup> However, he also remarked nobody enjoyed women "ordering others around." A study further supported her stepfather's claim, stating that 9% of Californians would not consider electing a woman. The lack of balance also reflected among citizen commissions, with a NOW report written by Gerrie Schipske noting that women comprised of only 38% of total appointments. Furthermore, women primarily continued to be underrepresented outside of traditional women's issues, with virtually no representation on major committees such as redevelopment or planning.<sup>34</sup>

This increase in racial diversity in city government began in 1976 when organizations like Long Beach Area Citizens Involved advocated for major structural changes in city politics. They began with redistricting Long Beach and setting term limits to diversify the city council. They also pushed for switching to district elections for city council and school boards, rather than having city-wide elections. As a result, individual districts had much stronger opportunities

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<sup>33</sup> Tonia Reyes Uranga, interview by Lauren Ribancos, March 21, 2024, recording and transcript, Historical Society of Long Beach Collection.

<sup>34</sup> "Gender and ethnic balance still needed on city committee," *NOW Long Beach Chapter Newsletters* (September 1990).

to elect officials who truly represented their district's demographics. This eventually led to women like Jenny Oropeza, the first Latina elected to the school board in 1988, and Doris Topsy-Elvord in 1992, the first African-American woman elected to the city council, gaining political power in Long Beach.

Long Beach found the 1990s to be difficult decade. The city suffered economically as two major employers, the Navy and aerospace manufacturing corporation McDonnell Douglas/Boeing, downsized in Long Beach resulting in thousands of residents losing their jobs. As a result, Long Beach residents felt desperate for new leadership. Various friends approached Beverly O'Neill, who at the time had retired after a long and successful career in education, to run as mayor against twelve other candidates. After 10 months of campaigning, Beverly O'Neill; became the second female mayor, after Eunice Sato in 1988.<sup>35</sup> Although she had never considered entering politics earlier, she soon became Long Beach's most popular mayor in recent history. She targeted Long Beach's economic decline through the "Three Ts: Trade, Tourism and Technology." O'Neill helped redevelop Pine Avenue and Downtown Long Beach and brought the Aquarium of the Pacific to the city, greatly attracting visitors. As a result of her efforts as mayor, she was also elected president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors in 2005. Long Beach even unexpectedly reelected her for a third term as a write-in candidate, defeating candidate Dan Baker.<sup>36</sup>

1994 proved to be a significant year for female representation, especially for Latinas. The Long Beach election offered two opportunities to elect their first-ever Latina councilmembers: Jenny Oropeza and Tonia Reyes Uranga.<sup>37</sup> The population of Latino residents had doubled since the 1980 census, as older white residents moved out to inland communities or states like Arizona

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<sup>35</sup> "O'Neill savors victory," (June 1994).

<sup>36</sup> "Beverly O'Neill turning 90: 'She led with love'" *Long Beach Post* (August 2020).

<sup>37</sup> "Many Incumbents Ousted in Muncipal Elections," *LA Times* (April 1994).

while Latino migrants moved to Long Beach because of economic or political issues in their home countries.<sup>38</sup> Due to the change in demographics, Long Beach residents strongly demanded more representation in the local government.<sup>39</sup> Latino residents in particular felt like the city government did not value their Latino constituents and failed to serve them.<sup>40</sup> Running to represent city council in the 1st district, which had been redrawn in 1990 to create a Latino majority, Jenny Oropeza enjoyed strong name recognition. She also had a very well-funded campaign, raising \$40,000, which doubled her opponent, community organizer Dianne McNinch. Despite the strong demand for Latino representation among constituents, neither Oropeza nor McNinch saw ethnicity as a focal issue in the race. Oropeza stated that she did not want to be elected merely because of her ethnicity, highlighting her experience working on the school board as evidence of leadership.<sup>41</sup> McNinch similarly believed constituents would ultimately be more concerned with safety than ethnicity.

Running against Mike Donelon in the 7th district, Tonia Reyes Uranga had established a long career in community organization in Long Beach. She started participating in activist groups while studying at UCLA in the 1970s, where she joined the Latino-dominated United Farm Workers. She had initially considered participating in women's groups as she identified as a strong feminist, but Uranga felt disconnected from many of the issues they had centered on. Nonetheless, Uranga's identity as a mother greatly influenced her political views. She credited her children for inspiring her to work in local politics, as Uranga wanted to buffer any prejudices her sons would face from the police force as Latino men. Her children's Black and Filipino friends further inspired her to develop more fair policies that would reduce racial inequality in

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<sup>38</sup> "Census Shows Asian, Hispanic Surge," *LA Times* (February 1991).

<sup>39</sup> "Many Incumbents Ousted in Muncipal Elections," *LA Times* (April 1994).

<sup>40</sup> "Latino Leaders Say They Feel Ignored By LB Candidates," (March 1988).

<sup>41</sup> "2 Latinas Make Strong City Council Bids In Long Beach," *LA Times* (March 1994).



Long Beach. However, Uranga also noted that having children often complicated her career. She always had her family with her while campaigning, leading one newspaper to describe Uranga's work environment as a nursery. She nevertheless did not see her family as a burden on her career. While the majority of her family did not enjoy how messy politics could get, Uranga remarked that her children loved the experience of meeting people during campaigns and earning community recognition. She likewise made her campaign a hospitable environment for parents and volunteers felt comfortable bringing their children as well.<sup>42</sup>

The city council electoral results were announced on June 7th 1994: both Jenny Oropeza and Tonia Reyes Uranga had won their races. As a result, they became the first Latinas ever elected to the Long Beach city council. However, Uranga had a victory of only 29 votes over opponent Mike Donelon on election night which was further narrowed down to 7 votes after they counted provisional votes.<sup>43</sup> Donelon asked for a recount, which led to his final victory of one vote and a new law that stated elections with less than a half percentage point were automatically entitled to a free recount. Uranga and Donelon ran against each other again in 2002, after Donelon had previously served on the city council for four years from 1994-1998. While Donelon had more name recognition, Uranga preferred campaigning door-to-door and had earned several endorsements from the League of Conservation Voters, Assemblyman Alan Lowenthal, city Councilwoman Bonnie Lowenthal, and the AFL-CIO.<sup>44</sup> Uranga successfully won the 2002 election and went on to work on new policies based on her earlier activism in labor unions and feminist beliefs. For instance, she began programs to encourage more women to join trades and rallied for fair wages for hotel and airport workers.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Tonia Reyes Uranga, interview by Lauren Ribancos, March 21, 2024, recording and transcript, Historical Society of Long Beach Collection.

<sup>43</sup> "Close Loser in Council Race Seeks Recount," *LA Times* (June 1994).

<sup>44</sup> "7th district election," (March 2002).

<sup>45</sup> Tonia Reyes Uranga, interview by Lauren Ribancos, March 21, 2024, recording and transcript, Historical Society of Long Beach Collection.

In addition to an increase in racially diverse female officials in the 1990s, female officials fiercely advocated for intersectional justice more than some of their more conservative predecessors. Many prominent female officials especially became outspoken advocates for the LGBT community. For instance, the Long Beach Lambda Democratic Club honored Jenny Oropeza with the Franklin B. Cook Memorial Award at their 14th Annual Human Rights Award banquet for her commitment to the LGBT community.<sup>46</sup> Oropeza credited her passion for LGBT rights to her mother, who taught her that every person should be treated equally and fairly in society. Further illustrating women's dedication to the LGBT community, every person Lambda honored that year was a woman. The club also honored Tonia Reyes Uranga and Mayor Beverly O'Neill, who showcased her support for the community by becoming the first mayoral candidate in Long Beach to ride in the city's gay pride parade and appointing a lesbian to her transition team. A far cry from Mayor Eunice Sato's notoriously homophobic policies, this advocacy for LGBT rights among local leaders eventually paved the way for the first out lesbian candidate elected to the city council in 2006: Gerrie Schipske.

## Women Now

Women's progress in Long Beach has continued to develop and expand in recent decades. Due to the trailblazing efforts of women, starting in the 1910s with Myrtelle Gunsul, women in 2024 have more representation in the city council than in previous years. As a result of this progress, the Long Beach city council voted unanimously to establish the long-awaited and once-controversial Women's Commission in 2023.<sup>47</sup> The commission received an initial \$30,112 to fund its development with plans to promote women's economic equity and safety in Long

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<sup>46</sup> "Lamba to honor locals for commitment to gay rights," (September 1994.)

<sup>47</sup> Kristy Hutching, "Long Beach formally establishes first commission for women, girls," *Press-Telegram*, July 2023.

Beach. Women have also increasingly allied with LGBT and ethnic movements to create a safer and more welcoming Long Beach that fully addresses its constituents' needs. Women have particularly emerged as leaders for their ethnic communities, including Jenny Oropeza or Tonia Reyes Uranga. Continuing this pattern, labor organizer Suely Saro became the first Cambodian-American elected to the Long Beach city council. Inspired by her refugee parents who worked in the garment industries, Saro ran for office to improve conditions for her diverse district.<sup>48</sup> Despite the amount of progress women have accomplished in Long Beach, women still suffer from discrimination while running in politics. Suely Saro remarked that she had to overcome difficulties as a woman during her campaign. Likewise, people often interrogated Councilwoman Suzie Price on how she would balance work and family during her campaign. Nonetheless, women have continued to push through barriers to fight for more representation and pave a more equitable path for following women and their communities.

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<sup>48</sup> Suely Saro, interview by Amarakvati Murphy Ly, June 2024, recording and transcript, Historical Society of Long Beach Collection.

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