

Sylvia Arenas vision statement for community healing and economic recovery for San Jose

As we picture a community that has successfully recovered, it's easy to fall into a vision of our community before the pandemic. But that picture of our community pre-pandemic is distorted with hidden and more blunt disparities. People of color, as a community, have generationally been deeply frozen by a housing crisis, affordability crisis, and deep racial and gender inequities. Because of this pandemic, this community has been extensively changed by the experience. When we acknowledge their historical and systemic divide, it's clear that it's impossible to use last year or even the "best of the years" as the yardstick for recovery. We must envision a future that our city and country has never experienced that involves an inclusive recovery for all.

On our road to recovery, it will take all of us. In that spirit, I invited District 8 neighbors to share their vision and priorities with me. Points they made have been included below, and more will be included in my comments at Friday's Council Study Session.

No crisis could, in our lifetime, more severely underscore the issues of gender inequity in our society than this pandemic. Women in our community and nation have been torn apart by the competing needs to continue to contribute financially to their families, while also taking on a outsized share of the exploding burden of child care in their homes. While many men have learned firsthand the difficulty of working without adequate childcare – by and large it is women whose careers have been deeply impacted by this burden. To top it off further, because so many women work in the low wage sectors most affected by the pandemic and restrictions, in many cases the decision has been made for them. The unemployment rate for women staggers that for men. In the most recent economic quarter, nationally, on balance all of the job losses were women, with men making small gains on balance.

As we move into recovery, we must tailor our policies with this in mind. We need small business support that specifically targets women and people of color for assistance. We need career and job training plans and programs with young women in mind as well as youth stuck in the depths of the educational gap that continues to grow. We must find matches for our youth, especially Brown and Black youth, in the many sectors of our local economy, especially focusing on college bound careers that can respond to our local needs.

Most of all we need gender parity policies – like I've been looking at in my family friendly city initiative – that specifically targets problems that we too often look to women to simply solve at the cost of their careers. Most clearly is the childcare crisis. We must participate in and champion the changes needed to allow both women and men to have successful careers regardless of the responsibilities of parenting. This need has been clearly identified and prioritized by the Governor (including in his new budget proposals) as well as the Biden administration, which has included this priority already in their COVID relief proposals. A clear window of opportunity exists, and we must not lose it. A recovery that doesn't include women is no recovery at all.

Additionally, if the need to have a recovery deeply rooted in racial equity was not clear before, our national summer of reckoning on equity and injustice should have cleared that up for us all. The effects of this pandemic have been felt most harshly and deeply by communities of color, and the economic policies of yesterday have never been targeted well enough to meaningfully support a recovery that supports those most harmed by the pandemic. We need to enforce gender equality laws on the books. And we need to reform our police response to move away from criminalizing women for the sins of men, but instead provide real support for children and women who survive abuse, human trafficking, domestic violence, and sexual assault.

We must radically rethink our economic development policies to provide targeted support in the areas most damaged. Santana Row will recover. Will Tully Road? How do we help families move from the edge of homelessness to prosperity? How do we help bring some equality in wages forward so families can become self-sufficient? It's vital that people of all immigration statuses participate in our economic recovery. For too long, our families have stayed deep in the shadows out of fear. They were suffering before Trump and before the pandemic, but the compounded traumas of these experiences have caused deep physical and psychological wounds that will make participation in our economy difficult – but also deeply needed. We must work inside the community intensely to rebuild trust and bring people into the economy. To do this, we must count on the Biden administration to make it safe for families to participate, but we cannot count on them to do the community organizing work for us.