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Joan Austin Lifetime Achievement Award

Vera Katz's vision lives on all across Portland

The former mayor's influence can be seen from the Pearl District and South Waterfront to the Portland Streetcar and beyond.🔑 **SUBSCRIBER CONTENT:**

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In prepping for a tribute to his mother earlier this year, Jesse Katz, son of former Portland mayor Vera Katz, went looking for some early headlines about her in the archives of the Oregonian. One of the first he came across was from December 1970 and read simply, "Service award goes to woman."

Other stories he found from the era detailed Vera Katz's involvement in a lawsuit against a men-only downtown restaurant called Perkins Pub and an effort to oust the president of the City Club of Portland, an organization that had just voted to deny women membership. An editorial endorsement from 1972 called her a "militant housewife" who was "easily outraged by social injustices" before giving her a thumbs-up.

The stories give an interesting look into some of the earliest days of Vera Katz's involvement in and influence on the Portland scene. But they also are only a hint of what was to come from Katz, both in terms of her advocacy for women's rights and how Portland would evolve over the next few decades.

"You think that we are having the #metoo and #timesup movements today, which are really important cultural moments," Jesse Katz said. "But back then, she was fighting battles to just even get in the door and get in the room. It's sort of amazing."

Vera Katz died in December at the age of 84 after battling three rounds of cancer, the first of which struck in 2000 during her second term as mayor. But Katz, who was elected to the Oregon House of Representatives in 1972 and became the first woman to serve as Speaker of the House, left a huge imprint on the Rose City before bidding adieu.

Nowhere is that more apparent than in some of the city's major real estate developments. Katz was key when it came to projects like the South Waterfront, the renovation of Civic Stadium, the



Vera Katz served as Portland's mayor during three critical terms. She died last year at the age of 84.

Portland Streetcar and the old railyards that became the posh Pearl District.

“She was the reason, and I truly believe this, that all of this happened,” said Tiffany Sweitzer, president and partner at Hoyt Street Properties LLC, the development firm that brought the Pearl District to life. “She was a leader. She was able to get consensus among her other council members and, as a result, made a deal with us that has turned into one of the most successful urban developments in the country.”

Sweitzer said Katz was very strategic in her approach to development and made sure that public dollars were appropriated fairly and in a way that helped various parts of town — the Pearl, the Brewery Blocks, the West End — develop together. Katz also could see the value of having an active central city, one accented with parks and energized by the Portland Streetcar, which came to be under Katz.

“The streetcar was a huge piece of all that,” Sweitzer said. “She could see at a time when we weren’t even considering streetcars that that would be an added attraction.”

Katz’s forward-thinking visions weren’t always met with open arms. The Eastbank Esplanade, which Katz championed, was originally derided as little more than an expensive, loud and dangerous jogging path.

“To think how widely it was mocked at first,” Jesse Katz said, “but now seems like a no-brainer. It’s the kind of thing that any city would want, both as a practical use of public space and as a symbolic gesture that looks at the river as something that binds the city together rather than cleaving it in half.”

Not all of Katz’s visions came to fruition, but even the ones that didn’t still resonate today. Her son said Katz’s biggest political disappointment was not succeeding in luring the Montreal Expos to Portland. A lifelong baseball fan, Vera Katz always thought every great city should have a baseball team, and that effort continues to have life in Portland. She also believed in capping I-405 and developing parks and other public spaces on top of it, another idea that was snubbed at the time but that has continued to live on in other West Coast cities.

“She did a lot,” Jesse Katz said. “You can see her fingerprints on lots of things that are central to the experience of living in Portland.”

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