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Judging Mr. Mayor

BY PETER DREIER

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Los Angeles magazine slapped the word "Failure" across a photo of L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa on the cover of its June issue. This was not only a cheap shot, meant to grab attention and sell magazines, but also a misleading assessment of Villaraigosa's track record after one term.

The article expressed disappointment, even bitterness, that Villaraigosa didn't accomplish all that he pledged to do during his 2005 campaign. "Your progressive platform," the magazine reminded the mayor, "if enacted, would cleanse the city of its toxins: street crime and failing schools, the evaporation of affordable housing and the carcinogens in our skies."

The reality is that no city on its own - even with the most progressive people in office - can accomplish those goals. Cities lack the financial resources and the legal authority to solve these problems. In other affluent countries, national governments take responsibility for addressing these and other issues.

In the United States, in contrast, we expect local governments to deal with the problems of poverty, homelessness, crime and underfunded schools, as well as the impacts of rising gas prices, traffic congestion and pollution, accelerating foreclosures and abandoned homes, crumbling infrastructure, widening wage inequality, escalating health care and food costs and the export of jobs to China and Mexico.

These are national problems that are disproportionately located in cities, but they aren't caused by the actions or inactions of municipal governments.

Indeed, what does it mean to be a progressive mayor when so many powerful forces - a city whose financial needs far exceed its revenue-raising capacity, a president (George W. Bush) and governor (Arnold Schwarzenegger) hostile to the plight of cities and the poor, a national and state economy in the dumps and a business and development community dominated by shortsighted executives resistant to taxes, living wages and regulation - are arrayed against reform?

Villaraigosa took office in the middle of the Bush administration - the most anti-city administration in recent memory. Across the country, city officials, reeling from the loss of federal and state aid, have had no choice but to cut essential services, including public safety, libraries, road repair and public schools.

Bush imposed many new mandates on cities - such as increased homeland security and No Child Left Behind requirements for schools - without providing the funds necessary for the cities to comply. Under Bush, federal funding for housing, public transit and other urban programs was cut, while needs escalated across the country, not just in Los Angeles.

It was the Bush administration that tried to stop Los Angeles from imposing strict environmental standards on trucks and shippers at the port. It was the Bush administration that pushed the policies that led to the current mortgage meltdown, the epidemic of foreclosures and the hemorrhaging of jobs in Los Angeles and other cities.

And let's not forget the 500-pound Republican elephant in the room - that the United States has spent more money destroying Baghdad than rebuilding American cities.

We cannot significantly solve our nation's urban problems without a strong federal partner - from universal health insurance to more funding for housing and public transit. President Obama will surely be a pro-urban president. Much of the stimulus package is targeted for cities. Once Obama's plan to revitalize the economy begins to turn things around, he'll be able to pay more attention to a broader urban agenda, and cities like Los Angeles will get some relief. But right now, Los Angeles, like every other big city, is trapped in a fiscal straightjacket.

Compounding that problem, the state government under Schwarzenegger has been in fiscal chaos since before Villaraigosa became mayor. On most critical issues, the state government has been missing in action.

For example, it is the state government - not local school boards - that is responsible for funding public education. And California ranks 46th in the nation in per-student spending. Villaraigosa had tried to gain mayoral control of Los Angeles' public schools but managed only to take over a small number of schools. Even if he had succeeded in gaining full control of the L.A. Unified School District, however, it is unlikely that he could have significantly overhauled the troubled schools without a major increase in state

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funding - a difficult prospect given the Republican stranglehold on any reform of state finances.

Any objective assessment of Villaraigosa's first term has to put his accomplishments and his challenges in perspective - something that the Los Angeles magazine story failed to do. But the article nevertheless provokes an important question: What standards should voters use to judge the success or failure of Villaraigosa or any other big city mayor?

The appropriate way to evaluate Villaraigosa's first term is to judge whether he used the tools at his disposal to make significant progress on key issues and how Los Angeles compares to other big cities on these measures. By those standards, Villaraigosa deserves praise for raising expectations, squeezing the city's limited funding to address long-standing problems and using the city's leverage to make Los Angeles a more livable city.

Most mayors are content to oversee the routine civic housekeeping tasks that residents expect from municipal governments - fix the potholes, keep traffic flowing, maintain public safety and (in some areas) remove the snow soon after a storm.

On the basic matters of civic housekeeping, Los Angeles has been well-served by Villaraigosa. Crime is down significantly. Traffic flows have improved, and new rapid bus routes are in place. Despite the usual griping by some residents, potholes get fixed and the garbage gets collected with reasonable efficiency. In his four years in office, the number of summer jobs for youth has increased from 3,000 to 16,000.

But Villaraigosa didn't run for mayor to be a caretaker. As a former union organizer, ACLU president and state Assembly speaker, he promised more. His landslide (59-41 percent) 2005 victory over incumbent James Hahn raised hopes, especially among liberals and progressives, about moving and uniting the city in a new direction.

Villaraigosa inherited a city where the divide between the rich and everyone else was widening - a city with more millionaires than any other city but that is also the nation's capital of the working poor. Housing costs were skyrocketing. Traffic congestion, inadequate public transit and the port made Los Angeles the most polluted metro area in the country. The schools were overcrowded and underfunded, with a huge dropout rate.

During his first four-year term, Villaraigosa has sought to be a new kind of progressive pro-business mayor - by redefining a healthy business climate to mean prosperity that is shared by working people, one that lifts the working poor into the middle class. He has tried to promote a more enlightened view of the responsibility of business to the broader community. He has encouraged, even pushed, employers to support workers' rights to unionize.

Building on the living wage model, his Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) and other departments have focused municipal subsidies on industries and firms that provide decent pay, benefits and a career path with upward mobility and create green jobs. He has advocated for a mixed-income housing law that requires developers to set aside units for working families.

On the question of public health and the environment, no big-city mayor has tackled the issue with bolder action than Villaraigosa. He got the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports to agree for the first time on a comprehensive plan to reduce pollution. He took heat from business groups for supporting the "clean trucks" plan at the port, the nation's busiest and the largest source of pollution in Southern California from idling ships and 16,000 trucks that line up daily to take cargo from the docks to area warehouses.

Under the plan, all the older polluting trucks will be replaced by modern vehicles, improving the air quality and health conditions in the surrounding areas. The mayor's plan also requires the Harbor Commission to limit the number of trucking firms at the port, a provision that could transform thousands of drivers from low-paid independent contractors into employees of larger firms, making them eligible to unionize, improve their pay and negotiate for health insurance and other benefits. The plan is without doubt the most comprehensive of its kind and has already seen results, despite efforts by the Bush administration, as well as the trucking and shipping companies, to thwart it.

On housing, Villaraigosa has funded the \$100 million Housing Trust Fund to create more affordable units, strengthened tenants' rights, improved code inspection to fix slum buildings and partnered with nonprofit community groups like ACORN, One LA and Neighborhood Housing Services to help homeowners facing foreclosure.

No big-city mayor in the entire United States has been as fervent a champion for the working poor - and for the rights of workers - as Villaraigosa. He helped the city's low-wage security guards win a union campaign by getting major office building owners to the bargaining table. He utilized the leverage of the CRA to create a pipeline of young people prepared for jobs in the construction trades.

Against business opposition, he supported a dramatic expansion of the city's living wage law to lift out of poverty several thousand workers at a dozen hotels near the Los Angeles International Airport. He has shown up at union picket lines and been a key behind-the-scenes mediator in several labor disputes.

Other agenda items - like the reform of public schools (which will require substantial state and federal funds), realigning job training programs (so that the city, community colleges, LAUSD and unions are working together to address the skills gap) and the planting of a promised 1 million trees (now behind schedule) - are still in progress and will take many years to complete. The jury is still out on how, or whether, they will succeed.

No mayor of a city of more than 4 million people - balkanized by a City Council comprised of 15 powerful fiefdoms and a separate school board - can please everyone. Juggling so many issues, with so many demands and so few resources, Villaraigosa, who was elected in March to a second term, has certainly made mistakes or frustrated some constituencies who expected more. For example, the mayor has faced reasonable criticism over the L.A. Police Department's effort to clean up Skid Row, often by harassing homeless people.

What should Villaraigosa do in his second term to build on his accomplishments and ensure a successful legacy as mayor?

1. A cleaner greener city. Villaraigosa has pushed the Department of Water and Power, the nation's largest municipal utility, to become the engine for green jobs and clean energy. He has already tripled Los Angeles' renewables portfolio, but the large-scale implementation of urban-centered solar will bring this vision home.

Last March, however, voters narrowly rejected Measure B, Villaraigosa's plan to create jobs and reduce energy use by requiring the installation of solar panels across the city to generate 400 megawatts of



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energy, enough to power 240,000 homes, at a cost of at least \$1 billion. Undaunted, the mayor still wants to move forward with a plan to reach those same goals and produce 10 percent of the city's energy needs with solar sources by 2020.

2. Good green jobs. The city can help create jobs that contribute to a cleaner and greener Los Angeles. The city is already moving forward on a plan, devised by the Apollo Alliance and adopted in April with Villaraigosa's strong support, to retrofit municipal buildings and train a new green workforce to do the work. This idea can be expanded to residential buildings to help homeowners, landlords and tenants save energy costs, reduce pollution and create jobs. Villaraigosa hopes to attract clean manufacturing jobs to invest in a new green technology corridor. This will require the CRA and other agencies to insist that all public dollars are used to leverage good jobs with training and a career path that results in a healthier city.

3. Housing. Housing advocates have been pushing for a mixed-income housing law in Los Angeles for a decade, one that (like those in 170 other California cities) would require developers to include units for nurses, secretaries, security guards, garment workers, school teachers and other low- and moderate-income people. Villaraigosa has been an ally in that effort - a cautious one initially, but increasingly bold as the grass-roots campaign by Housing LA (a coalition of unions, community groups and responsible developers) has picked up steam.

During the last several months he has pushed hard for a mixed-income housing ordinance - against the opposition of the powerful development lobby (led by the Central City Association) and some NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) homeowner groups, both of which have considerable influence with key City Council members. It is now time for the mayor to engage in private arm-twisting and public action to turn his admirable proposal into policy.

4. Planning for livable neighborhoods. Los Angeles outgrew its suburban roots years ago when the freeways became parking lots. Now Los Angeles needs to grow up around transit stops. Making public transit a real possibility for people trapped in their cars means both building up Los Angeles' bus and rail system and building up the areas within walking distance of that system.

Villaraigosa has already made a substantial down payment on his transit agenda. He convinced voters to approve Proposition R, a sales tax increase that will provide \$40 billion for public transit. He has championed a subway to the sea; this will require federal funding, but the city can become prepared with a good engineering plan and a timeline.

Putting in dedicated bus lanes on Wilshire Boulevard will allow some residents to bust through the gridlock and show others that you can get there faster by bus. It's time for the Planning Department to walk the walk and funnel new development to the areas with good transit. That means replacing suburban building height limits and parking standards around transit with a more urban approach of taller well-designed buildings and less parking. It means siting mixed-income housing near transit stops. It means giving bus riders shade and a pleasant place to sit while waiting for the next bus. And it means the mayor using his bully pulpit to challenge and inspire Angelenos to find the way out of the private world of their cars and into the city on foot, bike and bus.

If Villaraigosa makes significant headway on these goals in his second term, historians will view him as one of Los Angeles' great mayors.

This essay expands on an earlier version first published at LAObserved.com.

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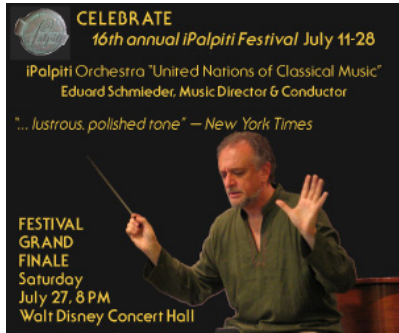
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