

## GOVERNMENT

# A Liberal Push in L.A. City Hall

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**W**ith the election of Antonio Villaraigosa and Martin Ludlow to the Los Angeles City Council, progressivism has reached critical mass in city government. On July 1, the two newcomers will join ideological and political allies Eric Garcetti and Ed Reyes in bringing a broad social vision of equity and justice to such city problems as housing, jobs, transportation and public safety. Although these four liberals do not constitute a majority of the 15-member council, they may be able to shape and implement a progressive agenda for the city as a whole.

At the core of a progressive municipal agenda is the belief that private gain must be balanced with the public good. Policymaking's aim is both to stimulate economic growth and promote social justice. No municipal leadership can ignore basic "civic housekeeping" tasks — pot-holes, garbage, playground and park maintenance and so on — in the individual districts. But local government can and should be more than that.

There are limits, of course, to what one city, on its own, can achieve. Huge budget deficits in Washington and Sacramento mean that the city can't count on outside financial help. However, liberal leaders should look beyond the immediate crisis to the time when the economy recovers and develop policies to ensure that future prosperity will be more widely shared.

Influential liberals have sat on the City Council in recent years. Jackie Goldberg, Mark Ridley-Thomas and Mike Feuer are three examples. Yet, during their service, aside from the living-wage law, progressivism as a formative influence in citywide policy was an aberration. Is there any strong reason to believe that the current crop will be more successful in pushing a citywide agenda?

One key advantage enjoyed by L.A. liberals today is that the city's broader social-justice movements have grown in numbers and political sophistication. The labor movement, especially with

## New Councilmen Villaraigosa and Ludlow offer hope to progressives.

hundreds of thousands of members, has emerged as the most powerful political force in the city. It is translating its electoral clout into public policy. Mayor James K. Hahn's recent appointments of labor leaders to the Community Re-development Agency and the Airport Commission assure that the voices of ordinary workers will be heard.

Villaraigosa and Ludlow both worked in the labor movement. Reyes and Garcetti have strong environmentalist credentials. All four have numerous ties to housing, civil-rights and faith-based organizations and activists. What's more, the city's elected leaders are more open to liberal ideas than in the past.

Business support for a progressive agenda may sound counterintuitive, but it is possible for the private sector to do well while doing good. Ordinances and regulations designed to increase social equity can include investment incentives, such as zoning waivers that make it easier to build. Additionally, paying workers livable wages, investing in affordable housing and improving transportation create demand in the local economy and help reduce business inefficiencies. Los Angeles is fortunate to have some business leaders who understand these connections and support socially inclusive economic growth.

Among the key imperatives of a progressive agenda:

■ **Link commercial development to community benefits.** One of the biggest problems facing Los Angeles is the widening gap between the very rich and everyone else. The proliferation of low-wage jobs, many of them subsidized with public funds, feeds the decline of the city's middle class. To counter this trend, the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, the driving force behind the living wage law, has proposed that a "community impact report" — along the lines of an environmen-

tal report — be undertaken to assess how each planned commercial development would affect housing prices, job location, transportation and public safety. Public hearings and specific proposals would ensure that neighborhood residents, unions and other affected groups have a voice in the development process. The council would then be better able to set minimum standards for jobs, wages and community benefits.

■ **Ensure that all residents eligible for the federal Earned Income Tax Credit receive it.** In 1997, the most recent year for which data are available, L.A. working families with incomes under \$35,000 earned more than \$509 million in these tax refunds, but at least one-fifth of the eligible families don't apply for the credit. If the city, along with the United Way and other philanthropies, helped employers, unions, churches and community groups reach out to these workers and encourage them to apply, up to \$100 million in spending could be added to the city's economy.

■ **Enact the "big box" ordinance.** The United Food and Commercial Workers Union has proposed the a that would prevent Wal-Mart-type stores from blighting neighborhoods by paying substandard wages and offering workers few health benefits.

■ **Don't do business with sweatshops.** Garcetti is working on legislation that would leverage the city's influence as a purchaser of, say, police uniforms to channel public dollars toward companies that pay a fair wage and provide decent working conditions.

■ **Increase the housing stock.** The city's homeownership rate, 39%, is among the nation's lowest. Last year, the mayor and City Council made history by creating a \$100-million housing trust fund to produce affordable housing. The city also revised its zoning laws to encourage apartments above ground-floor commercial space, which should add housing along major corridors. The next step is to adopt an inclusionary zoning law requiring builders to set aside between 15% and 20% of their units for moderate- and low-income families. More than 60 California cities have such laws, and they have experienced no downturn in housing development.

■ **Enforce health and safety codes.** At least one of seven apartments in L.A. is substandard; many of them pose serious health hazards, especially for children. City inspectors and the city attorney's office need to be more aggressive in fining and/or jailing slumlords.

■ **Rationalize transportation.** Long commutes, whether in buses or cars, undermine family life, hurt businesses and contribute to pollution. A rational transportation system would better connect people and places, as well as promote neighborhood revitalization. To this end, the city's four representatives on the Metropolitan Transportation Authority board should push the agency to increase the number of buses — particularly Rapid Buses — and maintain affordable fares. City officials should take the lead in increasing density along transit corridors by promoting mixed-use zones (housing and retail) and pedestrian-friendly streets that will generate economic activity.

■ **Promote a healthier environment.** The electricity the Department of Water and Power supplies is notoriously dirty. Half its power comes from coal; only 2.2% is generated from clean, renewable sources like solar, geothermal, wind and biomass, well below the state average of 12%. The city should require the DWP to meet the goal the state has set for private utilities: that 20% of its power be generated from renewable sources.

■ **Enhance public safety.** Protecting city residents from the threat of terrorism is now a municipal responsibility, but combating the daily terror of violent crime is more pressing. Community policing is an important tool to achieve this. But it can't work unless the citizenry trusts its police force. Too often that trust has been broken by incidents of police abuse. The city annually spends millions of dollars to settle these police-abuse complaints. Better training and supervision of officers would go a long way toward reducing the lawsuits, thereby freeing money to improve community-police relations. Effective community participation also requires that the city invest in the education and training of neighborhood leaders who could work with the Police Department to identify and implement public-safety strategies.

Los Angeles is now one of the most liberal cities in America. Its leaders are positioned to show what a livable, progressive city can be. As the new City Council and mayor move forward around a common progressive agenda, Los Angeles can become a model city for the rest of the country.

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