

Los Angeles Daily News

Asking the hard questions

Council members greet L.A.'s mayor-elect

By Angie Valencia-Martinez

Staff Writer

Sunday, June 26, 2005

Mayor-elect Antonio Villaraigosa pledged Saturday to remain strongly committed to advisory neighborhood councils in their movement toward empowerment.

About 700 people from across Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley attended the Congress of Neighborhoods at the Los Angeles Convention Center. There, Villaraigosa briefly addressed members of the youth caucus before taking questions from community leaders.

Many questioned the mayor-elect's support.

"I don't know," said Leonard Shaffer of the Tarzana Neighborhood Council. "It's a case of wait-and-see. He's spoken the right words. ... I would certainly hope that he continue to support the growth and development of neighborhood councils."

The advisory panels were set up under a 1999 charter reform designed to give communities more representation in City Hall. Today there are 86 throughout the region, and that is expected to balloon to 100 in the next several years. The councils were created under former Mayor Richard Riordan and flourished under Mayor James Hahn.

Edwin Ramirez, a Pacoima Neighborhood Council member, bluntly asked Villaraigosa: "What kind of commitment can we expect from you?"

Villaraigosa praised the councils as agents for change in the city, saying they are an important component in a democratic society and applauding their success last year in protesting a proposed hike in water rates.

"We've got some work to do, but I'm very supportive of what you're doing here," Villaraigosa told the hundreds gathered. "Neighborhood councils are Los Angeles' effort to create more civic participation."

Villaraigosa said he supported raising the money each council receives annually and involving neighborhood councils early in issues that affect them.

"They haven't had the resources to be as effective as they can be," the mayor-elect's spokesman Joe Ramallo said. "It's still a relatively new concept that he's committed to seeing grow and flourish."

Ramirez, who supported Hahn in the last election, said he expects Villaraigosa to continue working on the foundation his predecessor helped establish.

"I expect him to maintain the same level or higher level of commitment, helping to empower the neighborhood councils to improve city services. If he doesn't, he's going to feel the heat from the community."

While the Congress of Neighborhoods also featured dozens of workshops, the highlight was the brief appearance by Villaraigosa.

"He's new, he's a superstar," said Greg Nelson, general manager of the city's Department of Neighborhood Empowerment.

"The neighborhood councils are evolving and maturing in a way that is going to make them the most influential group in the city."