

"Incidents" Threaten Mayor's Fast Start

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September 18, 2005

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa took office in July armed with a 100-day plan drafted to ensure an energetic start to his ambitious agenda for Los Angeles.

But the plan didn't anticipate high-profile distractions, including a police shootout that killed a 19-month-old toddler and the sudden arrival of hundreds of destitute evacuees from New Orleans.

"Several major police incidents were not in any 100-day plan," said Robin Kramer, the mayor's chief of staff. "Hurricane Katrina wasn't in any 100-day plan. The DWP power outage was not in any 100-day plan."

Those unforeseen challenges, as well as some confusion within his staff, have left the mayor with just three weeks to complete his 100-day goals and influence the media appraisals that will come with the Oct. 8 milestone.

"There is no question that all this has taken some of our attention away from the affirmative things you want to do in the first hundred days," Villaraigosa said. "But that's what being mayor is all about. There is always going to be an emergency and something to take your eye off the ball."

The frenzied activity in the mayor's office last week indicates Villaraigosa is anxious to make up for lost time.

The mayor hopes to announce key appointments to the planning and redevelopment commissions. He plans to name a team of experts to draft a new emergency preparedness and security plan for the city. He has invited hundreds of L.A. residents to a City Hall summit on Oct. 1 to give them an unprecedented role in drafting his first budget.

And, looking for a blockbuster to cap his first 100 days, Villaraigosa is mounting a production with a cast of thousands.

The mayor is working diligently behind the scenes to enlist at least 6,000 residents to converge on half a dozen high schools on Oct. 8 to remove graffiti, paint walls, scrape gum from desks and otherwise spruce up the campuses in a "Citywide Day of Service to Our Youth."

The mayor, however, might face at least one more unscheduled distraction: He has been called for jury duty starting Monday.

Despite distractions, Kramer believes the mayor is "on track" to achieve more of his top priorities during his first 100 days.

The mayor signed an executive order on his first day removing lobbyists from city commissions and signed another last month prohibiting city road crews from doing construction during rush hours. He has appointed dozens of city commissioners and almost all of his senior staff. He has been to Washington three times and Sacramento once to plead for more money for transportation and security.

And last week, he launched a drive to fill 35,000 potholes in a 14-week campaign.

Many residents praise the mayor for his energy. In three months of mostly seven-day workweeks, he appears to have dropped in on almost every neighborhood in the city.

"The honeymoon is still on," said Brady Westwater, a member of the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council.

But others say they are still waiting for the grand accomplishments that Villaraigosa promised during the campaign.

"The jury is still out," said Louis Quirarte, a former chairman of the Arroyo Seco Neighborhood Council who backed Villaraigosa in the mayor's race. "There's not much substance yet, but he is everywhere. Nothing much has happened, but people feel great."

The 100-day analysis is a fixture in politics as the first measure of whether a politician's actions match his promises. "It's a long enough period of time to assess the tenure of an administration and the direction it is going," said Parke Skelton, a longtime political advisor to the mayor.

Even before he took office, the media-savvy mayor focused on this benchmark, assigning top political advisors to craft the 100-day plan.

That plan, which the mayor's staff would not release, was meant to smooth the takeover from the last mayor, James K. Hahn, and provide a blueprint for the early part of his term, Skelton said.

Some objectives have taken longer to achieve than Villaraigosa's advisors expected. As one example, the mayor created a new post of deputy mayor for education but has not found someone for the job.

Political reality has also intervened.

Villaraigosa initially announced he wanted the mayor to control the school district, but after strong opposition from allies, including the teacher's union, Villaraigosa said he would wait to seek such reforms.

Instead, he said, he would focus on the concrete help the city can provide, such as spending more on after-school programs.

The "Citywide Day of Service to Our Youth" is seen by some as Villaraigosa's attempt to save face over setbacks on education reform and show that he is doing something to improve the schools.

The event — at Banning, Fremont, Hollywood, North Hollywood, Roosevelt and Venice high schools — could also test Villaraigosa's ability to rally the city's residents to unite over common goals.

The plan has run into some opposition, a sign that Villaraigosa's young administration is still in the shakeout phase.

The mayor has sought help from members of the more than 80 neighborhood councils in Los Angeles, but some are resisting.

In a letter, Greg Nelson, general manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, challenged council members to join the mayor, saying the event gives them a chance to demonstrate their relevance.

"The mayor would like neighborhood councils to participate in this effort," Nelson wrote, adding, "Are you just a handful of people who meet once a month to take positions on things, or can you mobilize large numbers of stakeholders when needed to make your voice heard?"

Not everyone who received the invitation was pleased.

"The role of the neighborhood councils is to provide input on issues on what communities want," said Victor Viereck, chairman of the Greater Valley Glen Neighborhood Council. "It's not supposed to be a matter of the city telling us what to do. I think it's a way the city is trying to use the neighborhood councils. I'd have a problem with that."

Viereck said he does not plan to participate. Neither does Jill Barad, head of the Valley Alliance of Neighborhood Councils.

"People are going, 'Oh God, this is one more thing,' " Barad said. "I have not heard a lot of enthusiasm about it."

Another neighborhood council activist, who asked not to be named, also plans to skip the event, objecting that the councils are being exploited to boost the mayor's image. "They are going to use it as a political forum," he complained.

But others welcomed the chance to answer the mayor's call.

"It's a good idea to get people involved in the schools," said Russell Brown, a member of the Hollywood United Neighborhood Council.

Kramer, the mayor's chief deputy, said the event is simply a way to promote community service and help the schools.

"This is really an opportunity for people who love and care for their neighborhood to participate in its uplift and future," Kramer said.

For some community activists, that's enough to make the first 100 days a success, even though the city is no further along in hiring 1,000 new police officers or building a subway to the ocean.

"The tangible accomplishments at this point are all psychic," said Joseph F. Mailander, editor of the political blog Martini Republic. "He has enabled the city to breathe with confidence again."