

Mayor asks councils for help

By Rick Orlov, Staff Writer
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Outlining a broad agenda for Los Angeles even while it faces a \$345 million budget shortfall, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa called on Neighborhood Council leaders Saturday to join in his effort to reshape the city.

"In the end, this budget will come from me and my office," Villaraigosa told a group of more than 400 citizen activists gathered at City Hall for a community budget meeting. "But I want to hear from you on your priorities.

"Your participation is not perfunctory. I really do want you to get a better sense of what you feel are the priorities we have for the city."

At the same time he cautioned, however, that the city - which has a budget of \$5.4 billion this year - is facing a projected shortfall.

"Just like you budget for your home or your business, we can't spend more than we have," Villaraigosa said.

The mayor, continuing to emphasize election-campaign themes, said his broad priorities continue to be dealing with public safety, transportation, education and environmental issues.

Within those, he said, are specific issues affecting neighborhoods, such as filling potholes, trimming trees and maintaining services.

The meeting for the Neighborhood Councils follows efforts by former Mayor James Hahn to include the groups in developing budget priorities for the city. Under Hahn, this meant boosting spending for quality-of-life issues such as potholes and street repairs.

Villaraigosa said he is trying to accelerate Neighborhood Councils' involvement by bringing them into the process earlier. The mayor is not required to release his budget until April.

The mayor said he wanted the Neighborhood Councils to think broadly about the budget process and the needs of the city as they give input on city priorities.

For instance, Villaraigosa said there are the issues of major transportation efforts and improving education.

"I did not run to be superintendent of schools," Villaraigosa said. "I know the mayor

doesn't have the authority over schools, but I want you to know I am still committed to the idea that the mayor should have the responsibility.

"But, to get there, you have to build consensus and trust. That's what I'm trying to do now. But eventually, I believe, the only way to improve schools is to have one person in charge."

Villaraigosa has formed his own education panel to make recommendations to him. A separate group, appointed by City Council President Alex Padilla and school board member Jose Huizar, is also examining possible changes to the school system.

The mayor's remarks struck a chord with Daniel Villegas of the North Hills West Neighborhood Council.

"I think he hit exactly what we are concerned with - schools, transportation and public safety," Villegas said. "And I think he showed that he wants to hear from us. I think the mayor and the City Council are starting to take us seriously."

Judy Levin, who serves on two Neighborhood Councils in the Northridge area, agreed.

"A lot of people were concerned about whether the mayor would listen to us," Levin said. "I think he showed he will. What's important about a day like this is it does give the Neighborhood Councils access to the mayor and the city officials."

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Beginning Monday, the mayor's Web site will have a special section devoted to taking comments on budget priorities. Visit www.lacity.org.