

## Villaraigosa Asks Civic Leaders for Budget Priorities

The mayor surveys L.A. neighborhood council members for advice on choices he will face in developing the 2006-07 spending plan.

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Beginning the long process of preparing his first city budget, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa on Saturday asked more than 200 civic leaders to help him "get a better sense of what our neighborhoods want," as he looks ahead to what he said will be a series of tough choices in setting spending priorities.

Villaraigosa aides gave surveys to representatives of many of the city's 97 neighborhood councils — an experiment in grass-roots democracy that grew out of the city's 1999 charter revisions — and asked them to have their board members fill them out.

The surveys asked for advice on some of the policy questions the mayor's office expects to deal with as it develops its 2006-07 budget and submits it to the City Council next spring. The budget goes into effect July 1.

Questions include: Should Los Angeles expand its police force? Should the city pay for an expansion by raising the sales tax or by freezing or reducing spending on other services? (Last year, Los Angeles County voters rejected a half-cent sales tax increase that would have gone to fund law enforcement.)

Should the city reduce subsidies for residential trash pickups, increasing the amount residents are charged in order to free city funds for other uses?

How should the city prioritize other uses? Should the top priority be economic development, homeland security, improved traffic flow or neighborhood services — such as programs for seniors and youngsters, or sidewalk repairs?

Should funding for sidewalks be increased, given that at the present rate of spending officials predict it will take more than 50 years to fix sidewalks currently in need of repair? Should homeowners be required to pay for some of those repairs or should the current system of asking them to share costs be maintained?

The session at City Hall, the third annual attempt to involve neighborhood councils in the budget process, drew more attendees than in the past, said Greg Nelson, who directs the city's Department of Neighborhood Empowerment.

Neighborhood leaders were given an overview of the budget by Deputy Mayor Karen Sisson, who explained that one-third of the city's \$6-billion spending plan is earmarked for police and fire protection. She said only 10% of the budget is

available for discretionary spending.

DeDe Audet, newly elected president of the Grass Roots Venice Neighborhood Council, was one of a few leaders selected to speak to the mayor in private.

Audet said she was not sure what she would tell Villaraigosa. "My current interests are emergency response," she said. "Whenever there's a high, high tide and a downpour, some areas of Venice are flooded.... We have a little New Orleans."