

Mayor's budget questions draw anger

Los Angeles' civic leaders say input form that Villaraigosa wants distributed is "biased" in favor of higher taxes and fees.

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Nearly 400 residents from across Los Angeles gathered Saturday at City Hall to take their initial crack at the city budget, part of Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's first effort to collect input from neighborhood leaders on city spending priorities.

But some of those same leaders rebelled after being told to distribute a budget questionnaire drafted by Villaraigosa's office, saying the survey is skewed in favor of tax and fee increases.

"There's no way I'm taking this back to my community," said Harbor City Neighborhood Council representative Steven Horowitz, who called the form "biased" and "manipulative."

The four-hour budget session drew strong complaints from residents attending a session for Harbor Area and Westside neighborhoods. Some voiced disappointment that the mayor had already established his top policy priorities, while others said the questionnaire forces residents to choose between higher taxes and budget cuts.

Greg Nelson -- general manager of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, which administers neighborhood councils -- praised the mayor's survey as "gutsy," saying it is a departure from previous years when the questionnaire was several pages long.

"They wanted to present real-life tough choices to the neighborhood councils," he said. "They didn't want to sugarcoat it."

Indeed, one survey question regarding sidewalk repairs offered four options for accelerating the program: forcing homeowners to share the costs of fixing sidewalks, charging homeowners an annual fee to fix sidewalks, cutting other programs to pay for sidewalk repairs or allowing homeowners to voluntarily pay for sidewalk repairs.

Another question offered five options for expanding the Los Angeles Police Department: a half-cent sales tax increase; a sales tax increase of less than half a cent; reductions in library hours, street repairs and tree trimming; a spending freeze on non-LAPD services; and doing nothing.

While conceding that the form may be a "flawed instrument," Villaraigosa aide John Brady said the questionnaire is already biased because it mainly reaches active citizens. Furthermore, he told the disgruntled group that the mayor already has a policy agenda -- one that resulted in his election.

"You have to understand, there are two parties here," he told the group.

"There is you, and then there is the mayor and his administration. This is your opportunity to tell us what you think, within the framework that he has set by his administration."

"Now you might fundamentally disagree with that, and try to express that in other ways," added Brady, who handles Westside issues for the mayor. "But realize that framework is there."

The explanation was not welcomed by John Stinson, a representative of the Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council.

"It seems like a 'My way or the highway' sort of response -- 'We know this is a flawed instrument, but that's what we're going to give you and that's what you're going to take back,' " Stinson said. " 'Those are the kinds of answers we want.' "

Neighborhood groups have six more months to offer input on the budget, which will be submitted by the mayor to the City Council on April 20.

Already, the mayor is emphasizing that the city must address a \$250 million shortfall that reappears each year.

Villaraigosa started the budget event with a description of his top priorities -- public safety, transportation and schools -- and a promise that neighborhood council input would not be perfunctory. Throughout the morning, he allowed a limited number of community leaders a chance to meet with him, partly through a raffle that allowed winners to meet privately with the mayor.

Harbor Gateway North Neighborhood Council President BJ Mynatt used her time with Villaraigosa to discuss public safety and school uniforms.

Still, she complained afterward that the input process -- in which much of the big questions are already answered by the mayor -- treats neighborhood councils "like kids being told what to do."

Mynatt also questioned the mayor's decision to put a half-cent sales tax increase in the survey.

"When the mayor was running, he said we didn't need to have a one-half percent tax in order to get police protection," she said. "He's already voted against it, so

why is it on the survey?"

But Brady, the mayor's aide, said Villaraigosa's vote in February was against a city-only sales tax increase, not a countywide increase.

"He didn't necessarily say the tax was wrong," Brady added. "He said it was the wrong time to do it."