

## Mayor's spending survey a lesson in sharing the blame

Mariel Garza, Columnist

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Welcome to Los Angeles' "Budget-a-palooza 2005," the exciting event where Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa seeks guidance on how to spend \$6 billion in city revenue next year.

Villaraigosa is asking neighborhood councils to share some of his pain by making "Tough Choices for a Better Future." I know that's what he's asking because that's the official subtitle of the mayor's three-page budget survey that was handed out last weekend to members of the city's 86 neighborhood councils.

Among the four "tough choices" is how should the city fix its many broken sidewalks:

- A) Make residents pay extra to fix them, but ask them nicely.
- B) Make residents pay extra to fix them, but don't ask permission.
- C) Make residents pay extra to fix them, but tell them it's for something else nice, like helping orphans.
- D) Let the streets rot if residents aren't willing hand over more money.

OK, the exact wording is slightly different and more bureaucratically inclined.

But as far as I can tell, the Mayor's Office has decided that the city needs to raise more money by hiking fees or reviving the half-percent sales tax proposal, or the city's going to hell.

He just wants the neighborhood councils to help him decide which it's going to be.

The bonus is that they then can share in the blame when the rest of the city's residents complain about the gaping holes in the concrete.

Just consider the verbatim (as in, I didn't make it up) wording of the question seeking advice on increasing the size of the Los Angeles Police Department:

"Do you think Los Angeles should: (Please select one)

Expand the force by over 1,000 officers over 4 years by raising the countywide sales tax by one-half percent (which could also fund fire and gang prevention/intervention programs).

Expand the police force by over 1,000 officers over 4 years through a combination of budget efficiencies and an increase on the countywide sales tax less than one-half percent.

Expand the force by over 1,000 officers over 4 years by cutting back on library hours, recreational services, street maintenance, tree trimming and other city services.

Expand the police force by 400 officers over 4 years by freezing the level of spending on (ALL) other city services including fire, parks, libraries, streets, and housing at their current service level and funding.

Maintain the police force at its current size of 9,300 police officers.

The "tough choice" on trash disposal is similar. It gives only three rather limited options: raising the monthly trash disposal fee by \$7, raising it by \$28 over four years, or keeping it at its current level and paying for it by cutting other services while the city falls apart.

These are choices?

How about the one that asks about finding money by taking the \$75-a-month cell-phone allowance away from trash truck drivers and making them call their brokers on their own time?

Still, you have to give the mayor credit for being straight-forward about it. The budget survey makes it clear that Villaraigosa's got some set ideas about what to do with the city. Now we all know what they are.

"We tried to treat them like true partners," Marcus Allen, deputy chief of staff for Villaraigosa, said of the neighborhood councils. "We tried to get them enough information to understand the real choices the mayor has to struggle with."

I talked to a handful of neighborhood council board members to get their take on the budget survey and compare it with previous years under Mayor James Hahn. They all agreed that the survey was definitely shorter than last year's.

Other than that, Marty Woll, president of the Chatsworth Neighborhood Council, said there was little difference.

"I found it a little disappointing, primarily because it's the same guns-or-butter questions as last year - but in shorter format," Woll said.

"... It will give them some idea about community priorities, but it will not address the big issues. And the big issues are all related to how money is spent."

The idea of not having the full skinny on the city's income was a factor for Pacoima Neighborhood Council President Edwin Ramirez. He liked that Villaraigosa started his

process earlier than Hahn did, and feels like the mayor is asking for real advice, not just reaching out to make nice with the community.

However, it's hard to make tough choices without knowing what the financial consequences are.

"I'm not saying it's bad," Ramirez said. "But the truth is, to make a better, more educated recommendation we really need to understand what the funding sources are."

We'll see next year how these "tough choices" turn out. Meanwhile, the budget process showed the city's hundreds of neighborhood council members a lot about the city's new mayor and his administration.

And no one can put a price tag on that.