

Councils set budget priorities

January 22, 2006

By Rick Orlov, Staff Writer
LA Daily News

Making neighborhoods more livable and improving traffic were among top priorities cited by neighborhood councils as their leaders gathered Saturday to refine their message to Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and city leaders on where they want to see the city's money spent.

In a half-day session at City Hall, about 150 representatives from neighborhood councils voiced their goals for Los Angeles and its \$5.4 billion budget.

"It used to be, a mayor would prepare a budget, the City Council would approve it and that would be it. Today, it's different," Councilman Dennis Zine told the group. "You are part of the process and the budget will reflect your priorities."

Over the past several months, the city has surveyed neighborhood council leaders on what they think are their communities' preferred budget priorities. While some members said Saturday they were upset with how the survey was conducted - including areas outside the city's responsibility - most said they agreed with the priorities that resulted.

Using a weighted factor, the surveys found most respondents were concerned with livable neighborhood issues such as sidewalk repair, parks, libraries and after-school programs for children.

That was followed by traffic issues, economic development and homeland security.

Zine and budget aides to the mayor cautioned that even with the priorities listed by the group, it did not necessarily translate into where the most money will go.

For example, the city's largest department - the Los Angeles Police Department - receives more than \$1.1 billion of the city budget and will continue to receive the highest priority to meet Villaraigosa's goal of hiring 1,000 more police officers in his four-year term.

"But we aren't seeing the people come in to be police officers," Zine said. "The mayor and the council put the money in the budget to hire 700 officers this year. They aren't coming in the front door to be hired. So we have to match our priorities with reality."

Assistant Finance Director Ben Ceja said the city also is facing some grim financial realities - including a structural deficit that has been estimated to result in a \$245 million shortfall heading into budget deliberations.

"The easy fixes are gone," Ceja said. "The city has used up a lot of the one-time money

that was used in the past. We need to look at real ways to have our revenues meet our expenditures."

Among the problems facing the city, Ceja said, is an expected \$200 million increase in labor costs this coming year because of pensions and higher salary expenses.

The city also is expected to face growing construction costs amid rising prices for materials, including lumber, steel and concrete.

Villaraigosa has brought in efficiency experts to examine how the city can streamline its bureaucracy, Ceja said, but that will result in limited savings, given the demands for city services.

One area that neighborhood councils will be asked to consider is a possible increase in fees for trash collection and sidewalk repair.

Ceja said the city now pays 67 percent of the cost of trash collection; more than 40 percent of the neighborhood councils surveyed said they would support a \$7 monthly trash fee to make up some of the \$315 million annual cost.

"The mayor is not saying there will be any increases of this sort, but it is something the neighborhood councils should consider as they look at the budget priorities," Ceja said.

The neighborhood councils now will be asked to select 14 representatives - two from each of the city's seven planning areas - who will meet with Villaraigosa in February to discuss their recommendations.

The mayor also will be meeting with department heads to get their budget requests before submitting a budget plan to the City Council in April.

Neighborhood councils' inclusion in the city's budget process was started by former Mayor James Hahn. Villaraigosa has expanded involvement to include a ranking of city services.

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