

4/20/2006

L.A. needs more than promises

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LA Daily News

MAYOR Antonio Villaraigosa must have a red S underneath his suit. In his first State of the City address Tuesday, he promised to bend heaven and earth to remake Los Angeles.

Villaraigosa said he would hire the hundreds of new cops that former Mayors James Hahn and Richard Riordan promised but never could quite deliver. He'll get the money to do it by raising user fees on residential trash collection. Never mind that Hahn tried to squeeze money from taxpayers to hire more police, and got nowhere, or that Riordan didn't even bother. Taxpayers have mightily resisted higher taxes whether in the form of a property tax or user fee hike. But somehow, Villaraigosa is convinced that he can pull it off.

At the same time he's arm-twisting residents to pony up more cash for cops, Villaraigosa promises to unlock the gridlock that's made L.A. streets and freeways into parking lots. But traffic is not a city problem, it's a regional problem, and there is absolutely no political will on the part of the L.A. County supervisors and the dozens of charter cities in L.A. County to sit down with city officials and pound out a comprehensive regional plan. Yet somehow, Antonio believes he can make it happen.

Putting more police on the streets and solving the city's transportation woes takes money. But the city has a projected budget shortfall of more than a quarter-billion dollars. No matter - Villaraigosa says he'll order city departments to tighten their belts. Presumably that means less spending and less hiring. But most city agencies have been paring back for some time anyway. That hasn't done much to slice the deficit. Villaraigosa specifically fingered about \$60 million in savings he says he'll make by cutting waste. But even that's only a small fraction of the savings needed to crack the debt wall.

No concern. Antonio is sure he can do it.

And he isn't stopping there. On top of these Herculean tasks, he's got his eye firmly fixed on the biggest prize of all - the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Villaraigosa plans to forge ahead with his plan to take over the LAUSD. In his Tuesday night speech, he fleshed out some of the details. He'll give the more than two dozen charter cities that feed into the LAUSD more voice in running the district's affairs through something called a "council of mayors," and he'll rope the Legislature into approving the necessary legislation. He'll also increase the number of charter schools and bolster the power of teachers and principals.

The drive to overhaul the LAUSD, of course, is hardly new. But that doesn't seem to faze Antonio.

There is no sign that the ample honeymoon period that L.A. voters have given Villaraigosa is anywhere near ending. The mayor's trademark charisma, charm and political acumen, as well as his willingness to go anywhere and everywhere to meet with community groups, are still his strengths. But those qualities alone don't make great mayors, and neither does a penchant for making big promises that are difficult, if not impossible, to keep.

Villaraigosa ultimately will be judged a success or failure based on his willingness to be open and accessible to residents, and on his ability to fix the things that can be fixed.

Right now, that means putting the finishing touch on police reform and LAX expansion. It means providing greater funding and power for neighborhood councils, pouring more resources into services for the homeless, and promoting greater economic development in South L.A., which is still the city's most under-served community. It means making substantial and visible improvements in neighborhood services, and implementing better traffic control in the city. These are doable goals. Villaraigosa would be well-served to spend his time and still considerable political currency trying to attain them.

If he makes any headway in tackling these problems, he'll have something tangible to boast about in his next State of the City speech. That beats making big promises any day.

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