

From the Los Angeles Times

Mayor Unveils a Record \$6.7-Billion L.A. Budget

Villaraigosa, in his first fiscal plan, emphasizes public safety. He vows to place trash fees in a 'lockbox' to hire police.

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Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa unveiled a budget Thursday that digs into city reserves to counter a continuing deficit while raising fees to pay for what would be a major increase in policing for America's second-largest city.

The budget is a record \$6.7 billion, bolstered by revenue from a booming economy and housing market.

And its emphasis is on public safety, an area the mayor knows residents care about deeply. Most notably, it would begin to expand the Police Department by 1,000 officers over the next five years by raising the fee that homeowners and some renters pay to have the city haul away their garbage.

Police Chief William J. Bratton also saw money set aside for more police equipment and to pay for more police officers working in antiterrorism operations.

"This was one of the least contentious budget processes I have been through since I have been here," he said.

In fashioning his first budget since winning election last year, Villaraigosa appears to offer a little something for everyone, perhaps anticipating that he could be battling on a second front this year as he tries to push his plan to take over the city's public school system through the California Legislature.

His budget proposal, which the City Council must amend or approve by June 1, adds or continues voter-friendly programs to ease traffic congestion, fight street gangs, plant trees, speed Fire Department responses, expand library hours and pave streets.

But almost immediately, there was hesitation from some council members who said they had not made up their minds on the trash fee — which would jump by 155% over the next four years — or feared that it would unfairly affect poorer residents.

"I remain to be convinced," said Councilwoman Jan Perry, who represents parts of downtown and South Los Angeles. "It's something that needs to be thoroughly vetted in public."

Both Councilmen Alex Padilla and Herb Wesson also expressed reservations over the rate increases proposed by Villaraigosa, which would lift the garbage fee to \$18 a month, a \$7 hike, starting in July.

Perry also wants to make sure any language adopted for the trash fee specifically ties it to police hiring so the money cannot be siphoned off for other city programs.

At a news conference Thursday in front of the Van Nuys branch City Hall, Villaraigosa borrowed words from former Vice President Al Gore and promised to put the trash fee funds in a "lockbox."

"I want this money not to dribble and drabble and go to all the things that it can go to in that black hole. I want it to go to the men and women in blue," Villaraigosa said. "I want to make sure it has language that all the money generated by the trash fee ... is specifically for building our police force."

Besides the trash fee, the budget contained few surprises and largely continued programs already in place when Villaraigosa took office.

The budget would keep all branch libraries open six days a week, add two new DASH bus lines in the San Fernando Valley — in Sylmar and Van Nuys — and push to synchronize more traffic signals throughout Los Angeles.

The council would also see a rise in the discretionary money that each member can use, from \$50,000 per district to \$100,000. The budgets for the council, the mayor's office, the city attorney and the city controller also would get appreciable bumps.

Some of the day's best budget news came from an unlikely source — the federal government. At a morning news conference with the mayor, Sen. Barbara Boxer announced that she would seek \$80 million in matching funds for projects to revitalize the Los Angeles River.

In the run-up to the release of the budget, Villaraigosa spent months warning that he was inheriting a nearly \$300-million gap between city revenue and ongoing expenses.

In his budget Thursday, the mayor lists the shortfall as being \$287 million.

Villaraigosa has said he intends to erase it within five years, but his spending plan Thursday avoided any draconian cuts. Instead, he said he would slash \$40 million in spending mostly by trimming workers' compensation costs, selling surplus city property and reducing, freezing or eliminating jobs.

Like his predecessor, former Mayor James K. Hahn, Villaraigosa ultimately covered the bulk of the shortfall for 2006-07 by transferring a huge sum from the city's reserve fund, which is earmarked for emergencies.

Villaraigosa noted, however, that his budget takes less from the reserve fund than did Hahn — \$248 million compared with \$295 million last year. The mayor said that the reserve fund for this year would be about \$164 million.

The public safety budget includes \$15.5 million to replace more than 400 patrol cars and motorcycles and \$5.2 million to replace two police helicopters. In four of the 19 LAPD divisions, there would also be \$2.5 million for a pilot program to install video cameras in patrol cars.

Police officials say the cameras would help meet the mandates of a federal consent decree requiring the department to document traffic and pedestrian stops to make sure officers are not engaging in racial profiling.

One question is whether the mayor's hiring plan would actually increase the police force or just overcome normal attrition and retirements. His budget calls for a net gain of 135 officers in the coming year, with most of the progress toward adding 1,000 additional officers coming in years three through five of his plan.

Hahn's budget for the current year was supposed to expand the police force by 370 officers. With three months left in the fiscal year, the department is about 300 officers short of that goal.

Another question is whether the budget and the trash fee will pass muster with the 15-member council. In 2003, Hahn's plan to add 320 police resulted in a monthlong scrum with the council, which ultimately rejected it and then overrode his veto.

Richard Close, the president of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Assn., complained Thursday that the fee would put too much of the burden on homeowners and not others who also benefit from the work of the police. More than two-thirds of city residents are renters who do not pay residential garbage fees.

Jim Alger, president of the Northridge West Neighborhood Council and another longtime City Hall critic, also opposes using a trash fee to expand the police force.

He said the mayor's first-year goal for expanding the police force was "disappointing. It's way too few officers."

Several council members predicted that Villaraigosa would succeed and that constituents are open to the idea. "I know people expect us to be throwing food at one another because that's the way that City Hall is supposed to work," said Council President Eric Garcetti. "But I think it's a pretty unified city government with the council and mayor on the same page. I've been pleased with the response I've been hearing from the council today."

Councilman Jack Weiss, an ardent Villaraigosa supporter, said that the difference this year is that Villaraigosa has linked the police hiring to a dedicated funding source.

"It makes the case for fairness and it involves a mayor at the height of his popularity using his political capital to get out front and say quite bravely that 'I'll take the heat,' " Weiss said. "You won't see unanimity on this, but there is a strong majority on the council that supports this proposal and I expect it to hold."

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Times staff writer Jeffrey L. Rabin contributed to this report.

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

L.A.'s budget at a glance

Highlights of the 2006-07 proposed spending plan, which the City Council must revise or accept by June 1:

- **Total spending:** \$6.7 billion, about 11.5% more than last year.
- **Revenue shortfall:** \$287 million, offset by about \$40 million in cuts and \$248 million from reserves.
- **Trash fee:** Monthly residential rates go up by \$7 to a total of \$18, the first step in gradual increases over four years to raise \$28.5 million for police hiring.
- **LAPD:** Uses trash fee to add 650 officers to compensate for retirements and to start building the force by 1,000 more officers in five years; adds two helicopters, a new radio system and in-car cameras.
- **Street resurfacing:** \$80 million, a 34% increase from the current year, to maintain 500 miles of roads.
- **Libraries:** Expands hours, adds \$3 million in books, adds 215 computers and covers construction of branches in Exposition Park and Silver Lake.

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Source: City of Los Angeles