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Villaraigosa promises to fix L.A.'s problems while calling for a revolution in education

BY RICK ORLOV, Staff Writer

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Promising to confront the city's problems and make each tax dollar count, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa proposed on Tuesday a six-year experiment in school reform led by an education czar empowered to streamline the bureaucracy and oversee schools largely run by parents, teachers and principals.

In his first State of the City address since being elected mayor last year, Villaraigosa told an audience of more than 300 people at the Accelerated School, a South Los Angeles charter, that he is committed to ending the city's deficit spending while still hiring more police officers and dealing with the problems of traffic, homelessness, [air pollution](#) and more.

Using the school site as an example of the problems and opportunities facing the city, Villaraigosa said L.A. needed to "accelerate our ambitions" and urged the public to "dream with him" of a green and growing city that was safe and afforded opportunity to all to prosper.

"Here in South L.A., we have many of the residents of our city who work the hardest and earn the least," Villaraigosa said. "It's here in South L.A. that you see the most pervasive problems Angelenos face. Here, you can sense the frustration every commuter feels.

"And, in raw relief, you can see the shortage of community policing that plagues every neighborhood in our city, from Watts to Woodland Hills, from Toluca Lake to Silver Lake."

But it was reform of the Los Angeles Unified School District that brought out Villaraigosa's greatest passion and represented his boldest proposal.

Speaking directly to teachers to join him in revolutionizing the schools, the mayor said he was devoted to changing the LAUSD to bring greater accountability into the system - from educators, parents and students. Toward that end, he wants to see the bureaucracy streamlined and the savings put into classrooms and teacher salaries.

"Unless we face the crisis in our schools, we will never truly hold ourselves to account. We can't be a great global city if we lose half of our work force before they graduate from high school. We'll never realize the promise of our people if we choose to remain a city where 81 percent of middle-school students are trapped in failing schools. I believe we need to make our schools more accountable."

Students and parents need to be willing to take responsibility, including parent compacts on being involved with their children's education, allowing school uniforms and increasing the number of charter schools in the city.

Villaraigosa said it isn't legally possible for him to take direct control of the LAUSD because so many other cities are part of the district.

Instead, he will seek state legislation that would strip the school district of most of its authority except student discipline and parent advocacy. The legislation would then allow for the creation of a council of mayors that would pick a superintendent with extensive power over the budget, personnel and instruction programs.

"I think Los Angeles should have the biggest say since we have 80 percent of the students in the district," the mayor said in a meeting earlier Tuesday with Daily News editors and reporters.

Aides to Villaraigosa said they did not believe that a vote by the public would be needed to institute the changes. The bill contains a 2013 sunset clause to require a review of how the new district was performing, based on test scores, attendance, dropout rates and other factors.

The mayor's plan drew criticism from LAUSD Superintendent Roy Romer, who is retiring this year, and others.

Romer called the mayor's plan "radical" and questioned whether it could win approval. He accused Villaraigosa of ignoring the success of the district's school building program and achievements in raising test scores.

"I work for a Board of Education and they don't like it," Romer said. "I don't like it."

A.J. Duffy, president of United Teachers Los Angeles, said he will continue to oppose mayoral control.

"We're working very hard to develop collaboration with the mayor," Duffy said. "But, this is the one area where we disagree. One of our concerns with mayoral control is that the schools are a nearly \$7 billion-a-year operation. What if the city decides it needs money for some emergency and decides to take it? There will be nothing we can do."

However, former Mayor Richard Riordan, who is past state secretary of education, praised the proposal.

"I think it's the kind of bold change we need," Riordan said. "I wish I could have done something like this when I was mayor."

Rep. Dianne Watson, D-Los Angeles, a former school board member, said she supported part of the mayor's plan, but believed there was room for a compromise with other proposals short of a full mayoral takeover.

"I have to say he has courage," Watson said. "And we all agree something needs to be done."

On purely city government issues, Villaraigosa again stressed his proposal to expand the Los Angeles Police Department by 1,000 officers over the next four years with a trash fee, starting at \$7 more a month for residents on top of the \$11 already charged.

It is needed, he said, to stand up to the problem of crime and gangs.

"We will not continue to be a great global city if we continue to hold the dubious distinction as the most underpoliced big city in America."

The mayor did not offer many details of his programs -- many will be coming out Thursday with the release of his proposed budget -- but he did say he planned to be fiscally conservative with future spending, working to overcome a \$295 million structural deficit over the next five years.

This is being done with \$49 million in savings made since he took office and expectations of an additional \$40 million in efficiency savings this year.

Villaraigosa said he is creating a performance division within his office that will go over spending in each city agency to find savings.

On transportation, the mayor said he plans to create a "gridlock tiger team" of traffic officers, who will be dispatched to traffic hot spots around the city on a daily basis to deal with areas where there is the most congestion. He also plans to increase the budget for street resurfacing and maintenance. Other city efforts will increase summer youth job programs, expanded library hours and after-school programs.

"We can do all these things -- put more cops on our streets, work to keep traffic moving, we can green our city, we can make new our commitment to deal humanely with the homeless," Villaraigosa said.

Goshen Ethanol Plant Changing Hands

Valley Voice Fri., April 14, 2006

Goshen - Phoenix Biosystems, who partnered with Western Milling to build the state's first major ethanol plant, is selling its interest in the plant to an investor group, Malibu Partners, confirms Rick Eastman, who oversaw the development of the plant for Phoenix Biosystems.

Malibu has taken over the management of the plant that continues to run with staff in place. Principals with Malibu Partners did not return calls for comment. The deal to sell the stake in the 25-million-gallon plant is expected to close next month say sources.

Meanwhile efforts to ramp up the plant to 45 million gallons in the next year are underway. Demand for biofuels nationwide has exceeded supply despite a plant building boom that has been going on for several years.

In recent weeks a plan to end use of the substitute oxygenate MTBE in gasoline nationwide has spurred fears of an ethanol shortage and a spike in ethanol prices on the futures market. Pioneer ethanol producers like Pacific Ethanol used to have trouble getting bankers to listen to them when they explained why building an ethanol plant in a rural part of California was a good idea. The company headed by former state politician Bill Jones has now attracted big time investment in recent months including Bill Gates. This week the company stock continued to soar almost 300% over what it was offered for less than a year ago despite the fact the company has not produced a drop of ethanol.

"There is a kind of a gold rush mentality right now," says Rick Eastman who says he prefers quiet deliberation when deciding when and where to build an ethanol plant.

The same mentality is bidding up the price of ethanol shifting the blame for high gas prices in the public's view to ethanol despite the fact Saudi Oil at \$68 a barrel may have a more to do with it. Pacific Ethanol was an interested buyer in the Goshen plant but the deal to buy it went south months ago with Pacific privately saying they were disappointed in the way the plant was performing.

Pacific Ethanol is planning to build a new plant across from the Visalia Airport beginning later this year besides a Madera plant that will be completed this summer. Near Visalia, that means there will be at least four ethanol plants up and running in the next few years.

Malibu Capital is no stranger to ethanol, being an investor in the Calgren project near Pixley that is expected to break ground as early as next month. Malibu California, who is apparently changing their name to Actra, says on their web site they have plans to run five biofuels plants making 175 million gallons of ethanol and 80 million gallons of biodiesel.

Calgren now owns a second site for another plant in the Hanford Industrial Park says spokesman Matt Schmitt, who says the company finalized the purchase of 58 acres at Idaho and 10th in recent days. The plant proposal will file an EIR process over the next year through the City of Hanford.

In Visalia there is new interest in ethanol at the City of Visalia. City council member Greg Kirkpatrick says he is lobbying the city fleet manager to buy flex fuel vehicles that can run on E-85 85% blend of ethanol with gasoline. There are some 200,000 such vehicles in the state right now and the promise by the big automakers to produce more soon.

This week the State of California weighed in with a new action plan to reduce greenhouse gasses in the state by use of more biofuels, ethanol and biodiesel, in the gas tanks of California cars and trucks. The Governor released his Climate Action Team Report April 3rd, that set a goal for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 30% by 2020. The plan calls for implementation/undergo 46 measures that include the use of alternative fuels.

[S.F. Chronicle editorial, Wednesday, April 19, 2006:](#)

A greenhouse guessing game

Wednesday, April 19, 2006

After talking up path-breaking policies on global warming, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has discovered -- surprise, surprise -- that tough rules make for hot politics.

For a year, he has shown leadership in pushing California to the front in cutting atmosphere-clogging emissions. It's a noteworthy stance for a Republican leader saddled with an environmentally-negligent White House. But now, as legislative action draws near, he is bobbing and weaving.

Schwarzenegger hasn't totally ditched his pledges in the face of industry complaints, but his performance at an environmental summit last week was a puzzler.

After ordering up an exhaustive study last summer, he's now easing back from its findings. These plans call for a buy-and-sell system of pollution credits that gives points to clean businesses that they could sell to polluting industries. It uses incentives, not flat dictates, to drop emissions by 25 percent by 2020.

But there will always be trouble with such sweeping business regulations, especially in an election year. The cross-currents are tricky for a governor who professes to be both pro-business and pro-environment.

Schwarzenegger appears to want only a first step in the greenhouse battle. Targeted businesses, such as cement-makers, power producers and oil refineries, would have several years to report emission levels of carbon dioxide, methane and other gases linked to global warming. But actual enforcement of smokestack limits would come down the road, date uncertain, because of professed fears of job losses and extra costs.

It's a stall, aimed at pleasing both sides, but unlikely to achieve that. Businesses -- seeing it as a first step to regulation -- are suspicious of the relatively mild reporting requirement. Environmentalists want a full-monte program that will cut emissions, not just record them.

Schwarzenegger's fence-straddling may not work for long. Encouraged by the governor's earlier pronouncements, Democrats are backing AB32, which would cap greenhouse gases and, over time, reduce global-warming emissions drastically. Like it or not, governor, this bill may come your way because the Democratic leadership has made it a priority.

Ever the negotiator, Schwarzenegger has made it clear he's open to talking. He's now extolling his willingness to work with Democrats, after being stung by negative reports on this retreat on the greenhouse-gas rules. He's even called AB32's author, Assemblywoman Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills, three times. He hasn't appeared to lock in any final plan, she said.

This stance should give all sides -- business, Democrats and his own staff -- time to negotiate. It may also give him time to re-read his earlier speeches. Remember, governor, when you talked about global warming and said, "We know the science. We see the threat. And we know the time for action is now." It's still true.

[Letters to the Fresno Bee, Wednesday, April 19, 2006:](#)

'Could be paradise'

[Los Angeles Times reporter] Mark Arax is correct in his critique of efforts to expand Fresno's sphere of influence. City and county elected officials don't take criticism constructively. Elected officials have never been accessible, let alone taken objective advice that is in the best interest of the entire community.

Just look at our poor air quality, sprawling urban boundaries and why Fresno's hotshot developers buy their second home in places like Carmel and Hawaii to get away from the mess they created.

Fresno and the entire San Joaquin Valley could be paradise if elected officials and developers weren't so shortsightedly focused on a profits-only goal.

Richard Erganian, Fresno

'Need a new breed'

I thank Martin Demirjian and Mark Arax for trying to get our Local Agency Formation Commission to do the right thing (story April 14) and deny the city of Fresno's request to sprawl over 14 square miles of irreplaceable farmland.

Another cause for concern: All of that growth will occur in eastern Fresno County, home to the dirtiest air in the Valley and nation. The LAFCO board, chaired by Fresno County Supervisor Bob Waterston, has condemned thousands of innocent children to lives of needless suffering, disease and premature death. Those who die early will lose an average of 14 years off their lives. Many will lose far more.

Instead of striving to prevent "Fortune 500 companies" from hearing such news, Mr. Waterston should listen to the sounds of preschoolers sucking on inhalers and ambulances rushing heart attack victims to hospitals.

I think he and his fellow board members hear only the voices of land speculators and developers whose outlying properties have just soared in value. Both the problem and solution are political: We need a new breed of local politician. I'm walking precincts for Chuck Riojas and Cynthia Gonzales, both of whom are on the June ballot.

Kevin Hall, Fresno