

GREEN MACHINE

City officials think LA might fall short of green initiative goals

By Rick Orlov, Staff Writer

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The day he was sworn into office in 2005, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa proclaimed his desire to see Los Angeles become "the greenest big city in America."

As mayor he committed to boosting the city's renewable energy portfolio, promised to make traffic flow faster to reduce emissions and launched the Million Trees L.A. initiative to literally make the city greener.

Yet, to the average Angeleno, the improvements seen are minimal.

The city has yet to develop the major solar energy program it had sought.

Traffic continues to bog down commutes.

And where are those million trees?

"A million trees?" sighs Romel Pascual, deputy mayor for energy and environment. "We are stuck with the 1 million number. How do we get

there? Well, first off, we need more money. You can't just plant a tree and leave it there. You have to take care of it."

He said the city has planted 280,000 new trees, compared to previous administrations that planted about 10,000 a year.

Paige Van Rider, director of engagement and technology at the environmental nonprofit Tree People, which has worked with the city on the program, said the major obstacle has been lack of financing.

"There are people out there who do love trees," Van Rider said. "The first few years, we were able to do more because there was so much excitement around the program. That kind of faded and it is impressive what has been accomplished on a shoe string."

Similarly, the excitement around several of the mayor's environmental initiatives has also faded, mostly again because of a lack of funding.

The city's budget deficit forced Villaraigosa to oversee the dismantling of the Environmental Affairs Department, merging some of its functions with the mayor's own Office of Energy and the Environment.

His vision to create a Clean Tech Corridor in downtown Los Angeles has languished, a victim to the economy and talks that broke down with Italian car maker AnsaldoBreda, which had talked about building an assembly plant

downtown.

Villaraigosa and the Department of Water and Power also failed to pass Measure B, the solar initiative defeated by a grassroots effort in the 2009 election.

"I get a general sense that part of the problem he has is no one is paying attention to him on policy issues," said political analyst Sherry Bebitch Jaffe, with the University of Southern California.

"I recognize that's a terrible thing to say, but the public perspective of what he has done as mayor is being overshadowed by the personal stuff like the ethics questions and who gave him tickets and his personal life."

And, most recently, the mayor became bogged down with the City Council in a battle over the DWP's proposal to raise rates to help boost the department's renewable energy proposal.

Despite those shortcomings, Villaraigosa and his staff remain undeterred. They also point to several successes they have had in the environmental field.

Losing the Environmental Affairs Department, the mayor's office said, would allow every city agency, rather than just one, to focus on green issues.

"When the department began, it was designed to get each department to develop an

environmental agenda," Pascual said. "It got away from that and now the mayor is bringing that back. We are not losing anything with the mayor's Office of Energy and the Environment."

They also argue that the programs they have started may take years to show results, but they will result in substantial improvements, including cleaning up the ports, traffic signal synchronization and adding more park space.

One success they tout has been the city's green building program, where all new city buildings – such as the LAPD's new administration and terminals at Los Angeles International Airport – must meet stricter environmental standards.

Airport officials said they have undertaken a number of other steps at the mayor's direction – including energy efficiencies, reductions in noise and air pollution and an increase in recycling while reducing water consumption.

Another achievement that has generated interest around the world, even while sometimes being overlooked at home: LED traffic signals.

Pascual said the LED bulbs last five times longer and have much lower energy and maintenance than regular bulbs, although they are initially 40 percent more expensive to purchase.

The program generated enough interest that Villaraigosa was invited to the Copenhagen Climate Summit to speak about the impact the LED signals are having on the environment.

"They like it because it is something they can do," Pascual said. "It is a program every city can easily adopt and point to.

"It seems like such a little thing, but when you look at it, we've installed about 20,000 LED street lights and it's saved us close to 25,000 tons of carbon. That's the energy to power the regular bulbs, the cost to maintain them and the cost to replace them."

The mayor is continuing to push for the DWP to produce more renewable energy through solar power, although officials say they have seen more success with wind power.

When Villaraigosa took office, 3 percent of the DWP's energy was renewable. Despite the Measure B setback, DWP officials said they expect to hit the mayor's goal of 20 percent this year.

Also, the department has approved both energy and water efficiency.

With conservation programs, Los Angeles is using 19 percent less water than in 2006, spokesman Joe Ramallo said.

On the energy front, conservation has resulted in the saving of 318 gigawatt hours.

The DWP has promoted multiple conservation programs, including low-flush toilets, energy efficient refrigerators and light bulbs for

customers.

Mary Leslie, president of the Los Angeles Business Council and a long-time environmentalist, said she believes Villaraigosa's biggest accomplishment was the 2008 campaign that led voters to approve Measure R, the half-cent sales tax for countywide transit programs.

Villaraigosa has been lobbying Washington, D.C., to advance the \$40 billion to be raised by the tax over the next 10 years, rather than 30 years, to accelerate the projects.

"That could end up being the most important thing he has accomplished," Leslie said. "It eclipses everything else for what it can accomplish.

"It will create jobs and reduce car trips. It is something every other mayor in the country wishes they had."

Villaraigosa also gets high marks for his efforts around the Port of Los Angeles, with the Clean Truck Program and the effort to get ships to plug in to the electrical grid, rather than burn diesel fuel - a program started by his predecessor, Mayor James Hahn.

"My brother started it all," Councilwoman Janice Hahn said. "But, I have to say, this mayor has done well taking port cleanup further."

To help advise the mayor in his final years in office, Pascual said there are plans to create a

"green panel" of environmentalists.

"The mayor wants to make sure the city is staying on track with its programs," Pascual said.

"A city as big as Los Angeles needs to stay on track and that's what we hope this panel will do."