

Villaraigosa's 30/10 vision

Washington should get behind the mayor's transit proposal for L.A.

Opinion: February 26, 2010 | Tim Rutton

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has been in Washington this week, meeting with other cities' chief executives and, more important, asking key lawmakers and transportation officials to support an audacious public works plan that simultaneously addresses Los Angeles' unemployment and traffic crises.

Villaraigosa never has been short on ambitious ideas, but his so-called 30/10 proposal is one of the best he's ever put forward. It deserves the support not only of the Obama administration but also of both sides of the aisle in California's large but fractious congressional delegation.

Essentially, the mayor is taking the administration at its word when it says it wants to focus on jobs and to stimulate the economy by steering funds to "shovel-ready" projects. The 30/10 plan does both of those things, and does so in a shrewd and attractive way.

The mayor's proposal starts with last year's passage of Measure R, in which Los Angeles County voters agreed to increase the sales tax by half a cent for 30 years in order to raise \$40 billion to construct a specific roster of mass transit projects, including westward extension of the subway to Santa Monica and additions to the light-rail Gold Line in the San Gabriel Valley.

In essence, Villaraigosa wants Washington to give the Metropolitan Transportation Authority what amounts to a bridge loan so that rather than stretching the construction projects out over three decades, as Measure R anticipated, all the work can be completed in just 10 years. The loan would be secured by the tax revenue county voters already have pledged to the projects.

As such, it presents the administration with an opportunity to create badly needed jobs and invest in a region that desperately needs traffic relief -- at no long-term cost to the federal budget.

As Villaraigosa pointed out in Washington this week, "At a time when almost all states and most cities are going to Washington with one hand open, we're going with money in one hand and an open hand for a partnership in the other." In early meetings with lawmakers, he urged them to give special consideration to the fact that "we're the one city in the country that -- in the middle of a recession -- passed this measure. . . . We could be a blueprint of what other cities should be doing."

That would be a pleasant change indeed.