

LA WEEKLY

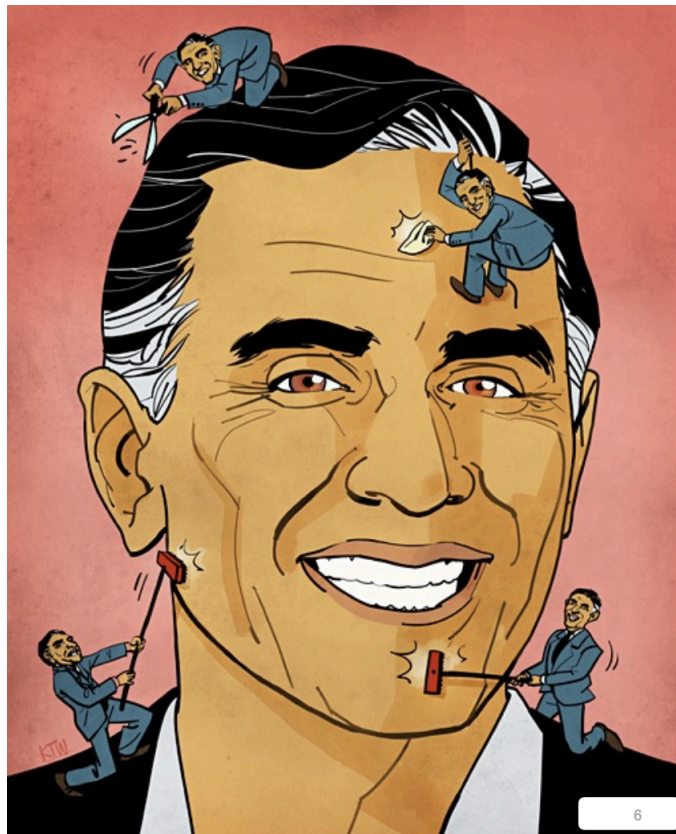


Illustration by Kyle T. Webster

The All-About-Me Mayor: Antonio Villaraigosa's Frenetic Self-Promotion

 Patrick Range McDonald September 10, 2008

IN THE EARLY AFTERNOON of July 14, a week after quietly slipping home from a trip to Hawaii, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa was halfway through a typical workday. He'd spent the morning doing interviews on two Latino radio stations, his picture was taken with an old friend, Juan Alvarez, he met with major labor union insider Sean Harrigan, he lunched with his staff, he was prepped by aides on what to say at an upcoming press conference urging Angelenos to vote for higher taxes, and he held a meeting to discuss one of his persisting embarrassments as mayor — his failure to plant a promised “one million trees,” or even a fraction of them, in Los Angeles.

As he began his closed-door meeting to review the million-trees fiasco, a loose coalition of angry community activists billing themselves as the Save L.A. Project stood on the steps of City Hall, venting frustration over the Los Angeles Unified School District, the mayor's stiff new rate increases on Angelenos' utility bills, and a controversy over alleged backroom talks by Villaraigosa's Planning Department “density hawks” about building yet another big-box project, this time a Home Depot in the Valley.

Villaraigosa's spokesman, Matt Szabo, had the job of watching the protest so he could report back to the mayor, who has made his frenetic hourly pace and constant busyness the hallmarks of his first three years in office. After getting briefed for a carefully staged press conference scheduled the following day, at which Villaraigosa would urge L.A. residents to back a big boost in the Los Angeles County sales tax, he prepared for a special meeting at the posh mayoral mansion, Getty House, that was of pressing importance: posing for a statue of himself for Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum.

At the hourlong “sitting,” Villaraigosa offered the Tussaud's creative team the quiet privacy of his official residence, on the leafy border of Hancock Park and Windsor Square on Irving Boulevard. Three artists had flown in from London, meeting him at Getty House with boxes of fake eyeballs, hair samples and tooth samples.

Inside the historic mansion, they placed Villaraigosa on a stool atop a giant turntable and went to work, twisting him back and forth as they snapped photographs, took measurements and matched their anatomy samples to their real-life subject.

“He was approached,” says Jack Holland, an external-relations representative for Madame Tussaud's, “and he was very gracious to cooperate.”

At a minimum cost of \$200,000 per wax statue, the team needed to be thorough and precise, especially since the mayor is all set to become one of 80 celebrities featured at the new Madame Tussaud's, opening on Hollywood Boulevard next spring — further fulfillment of the fame Villaraigosa avidly pursues.

Holland says the wax-sculpting team not only makes an exact copy of its subject but “is also able to discern the character and personality of a person, which makes our creations so lifelike.”

It’s unknown what the team learned about Villaraigosa’s character or personality. But the fact that the mayor so eagerly posed for a tribute to himself offered some telling clues.

Los Angeles’ mayor has not yet produced any results in improving schools, addressing greatly worsening traffic, keeping kids from joining gangs, cleaning the city’s infamously filthy sidewalks, halting patently illegal clutter like 10-story building ads and thousands of illicitly constructed billboards, or controlling his spending in a time of family belt-tightening. Since May of 2007, when a negative profile in *The New Yorker*, citing his “single-minded ambition” and “drive for self-aggrandizement,” shattered his press honeymoon and made his local media coverage look parochial and protective, Villaraigosa has been slammed for wrecking his marriage and has backed the wrong horse for president.

Time has become his defensive tool, and the mayor continually touts his rushing, 16-to-18-hour workday in speeches and media interviews to anyone who questions his commitment.

Yet his latest work schedule, from May 21 to August 1, which *L.A. Weekly* obtained from his office through a California Public Records Act request, shows the man has a peculiar way of using that time — which works out to 13 hours, not 16 or 18 per day. (Click here for [“How Mayor Villaraigosa Spends His 16-Hour Days,” by Patrick Range McDonald](#).) The document reveals that the mayor spends most of his working day flying in and out of town, holding staged press conferences, attending banquets, ceremonies and parties, raising political money and providing face time to high-powered special interest groups in a position to help his political advancement.

“No mayor has been out of town like Antonio, not in my time in Los Angeles,” says former *Daily News* editor Ron Kaye, who organized the Save L.A. Project rally in mid-July at City Hall. “And part of his game is to be buried in nonsense. ... He needs to get to work!”

Kaye’s and Villaraigosa’s definitions of “work” differ greatly. The mayor’s schedule — which was provided to the *Weekly* with fat chunks blacked out, despite his 2005 campaign vow to establish a new kind of “transparent” administration — clearly shows a man who’s infinitely more preoccupied with his career and his press coverage than with shaking up the ossified City Hall bureaucracy or fighting threats to the quality of life in L.A.

“My reaction [to the schedule],” says a former mayoral-administration official in Los Angeles, who requested anonymity, “is that he’s someone who’s looking for his next job.”

Villaraigosa clearly disagrees. Spokesman Szabo told the *Weekly* that Villaraigosa didn't have time to discuss the issue, suggesting the paper try to “catch up” with the mayor at one of his upcoming public relations events. Szabo issued a statement declaring: “Los Angeles has one of the hardest-working mayors in America, and one who understands that it is more important to be out in the community he serves than to remain ensconced in City Hall's downtown offices.”

Kaye, who published sharply worded and widely read editorials about Villaraigosa when the editor ran the show at the *Daily News*, says, “After three years, it's pretty clear how Antonio has used the office. For him, it's ceremonial, and he's the public face of City Hall, instead of being a guy who rolls up his sleeves and gets down to the nitty-gritty. He made the wrong choice. He made the choice to look after his own interests.”

From his agreement to sit on a giant turntable for a wax-museum sculpture of himself to his pursuit of fluffy media interviews and out-of-town political cash-gathering, Villaraigosa tends to spend his days on things that have the potential to benefit him. A 55-year-old politician who likes to consider himself a man of the people, Villaraigosa is instead turning out to be the All-About-Me Mayor.

ON JUNE 25, VILLARAIGOSA rode the Metro Red Line subway from Union Station to the San Fernando Valley with several journalists in tow. During the half-hour trip, the mayor worked his charm, yelling out several times to nobody in particular, “I love my job!” At one point, he walked up to a black passenger, gave a soul shake of sorts and called him “brother.” The mayor was ebullient, even offering to hold a nearby reporter's digital tape recorder while the journalist tossed him questions. It seemed a polite gesture, but then Villaraigosa glanced around at the other journalists to be sure his act did not go unnoticed. “See? I'm a nice guy,” he announced. “I'm a nice guy!”

At the end of the subway ride, during a heavily produced media event, he and MTA officials announced six new Rapid Bus lines crisscrossing the Valley. The mayor then posed for photographers while sitting at the wheel of a shiny red bus, dubiously shouting out, “This is the best innovation the MTA has ever come up with!”

But a reporter had a different question, asking Villaraigosa why he goes on so many out-of-town trips. In a standard reply, he claimed he has to go to Sacramento and Washington to “get money for L.A.” (He reiterated this claim when pressed about his travel by Warren Olney on KCRW in mid-July, saying, “That's where we get our money.”)

This mayor likes moving around with an entourage. (At the Democratic National Convention in Denver, one of Barack Obama's superdelegates tells the *Weekly*, Villaraigosa was constantly accompanied by a photographer and a security detail — in one of the most heavily secured arenas

on the face of the globe — and landed himself on TV by sitting just behind Bill Clinton. San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom, meanwhile, moved easily through the crowds without bodyguards.)

On the subway train in L.A., Villaraigosa's large group included several aides, two Los Angeles County Sheriff's deputies, a few MTA officials and a handful of reporters. Three of those journalists had flown 7,257 miles from China to speak with him. But, one mayoral aide told the *Weekly*, Villaraigosa had canceled on them the day before.

Now, with the mayor temporarily captive on the same subway car, the Chinese reporters intended to carry out their job. They approached him, offering traditional bows and smiles. The woman and two men had traveled from Guangzhou, a major city in southern China, on assignment for an article on how to build a global 21st-century capital, and Villaraigosa was their prized interview.

The mayor, dressed in a dark suit with a gold tie, looked hesitant after one of the Chinese reporters explained in English that it was time for their scheduled chat. "Well, why don't you walk with me and ask your questions as I meet with the people?" the mayor offered.

The journalists were resistant. They had flown across the Pacific Ocean and met with elected officials in L.A., and now Villaraigosa was expecting them to call out their questions as he walked ahead of them, glad-handing subway riders? They didn't want to be part of such a staged political event. When Villaraigosa literally ran out of hands to shake, the reporters finally cornered him near an exit door.

Their interview focused on several specifics involving L.A.'s economic relationship with China, the mayor's ideas for building an environmentally sustainable city, and his efforts to improve the public-transit system. Villaraigosa's smile vanished. Not known for taking an avid interest in the day-to-day running of L.A., he looked bored, and his answers were sound bites rather than serious analysis. Within minutes, Villaraigosa told them he'd had enough.

Clearly unsatisfied with the shove-off, the Chinese reporters approached him again. Villaraigosa looked unhappy and stated loudly, "You have more questions!" — then provided them with a few brief comments. For all their time and expense, the Chinese reporters got less than 10 minutes of his time and fuzzy-sounding quotes. Their prized interview was a bust.

Another mayor might have rolled out the red carpet for these rare visitors, whose stories would be read by quite a few movers and shakers in a major import-export market for Los Angeles. But the mayor was a busy man that Wednesday. At noon, he was expected at the law office of Park & Velayos, where a wealthy real estate developer, David Chang, co-hosted a \$1,000-per-person fund-raiser for Villaraigosa's re-election. Then he would fly off to San Francisco for another fund-raiser for himself at 6 p.m., hosted by former San Francisco mayor Willie Brown.

In fact, out of 15 hours and 30 minutes of scheduled work for Wednesday, June 25 — a day that ran seamlessly into dozens of other, similar days this summer — the mayor spent 50 minutes on real city business. He was on the go, but it wasn't about running Los Angeles.

His actual city work that day included a 20-minute briefing on an upcoming Metro board meeting, one he must attend as a member of Metro's voting board, which oversees the roughly \$3 billion annual spending on MTA buses, rail and other regional transit. His other city work on June 25 included taking an "urgent" 30-minute phone call from his chief of staff, Robin Kramer, of unknown content.

The rest of that day went to his efforts to be quoted in the newspapers the next day, his push to get money from his donors, and his staged, feel-good activities — focused on himself. He spent two hours riding the subway and speaking at the Metro press conference and 30 minutes meeting press and neighborhood people at a staged reopening of the 109th Street swimming pool in a poor area of South Los Angeles. He chewed up several hours attending the noon fund-raiser for himself held by rich developers, and making the fund-raising trip to San Francisco.

In fact, as summer unfolded and the weeks wore on, Villaraigosa spent surprisingly little time focused on real city problems. He did hold several meetings and candidate interviews related to his new, as-yet-untested gang-reduction program. But in the weeks leading up to his takeover of 10 low-performing LAUSD schools, he met for only a half-hour each with school-board president Monica Garcia and deputy superintendent Ramon Cortines. No entries indicate any meetings with Marshall Tuck, CEO of the mayor's Partnership for L.A. Schools, which is directing the takeover.

The work schedule obtained by the *Weekly* from the mayor's office is heavily blacked out to cover over his fund-raising and what his aides call personal time and family-security-related issues. For example, all 18 fund-raisers Villaraigosa scheduled for himself between May 21 and July 1 are redacted with a black marker, including all details of his San Francisco and downtown L.A. fund-raising events on June 25.

When asked why the mayor blacks out large portions of his days, Szabo wrote back in an e-mail that the "redacted items are either personal, family or security-related" and cited a legal ruling allowing politicians to black out such information. However, he then gave another reason, saying he blacked out the fund-raisers because "this office doesn't manage the mayor's political affairs." Szabo did not respond to a follow-up e-mail from the *Weekly* on how Villaraigosa defines those three blacked-out categories. Villaraigosa, who now carefully limits media interviews on controversial issues, did not respond to phone calls from the *Weekly* seeking his comment.

But certainly his fund-raising trip to San Francisco is a public matter, not a private one, as it was covered by the media. Peter Scheer, executive director of the California First Amendment Coalition, says Villaraigosa and the mayor's office are on shaky ground by issuing a heavily blacked-out calendar. "[Fund-raisers] are part and parcel in his attempt to get re-elected," says Scheer, "and that's a very public matter. And he's attending fund-raisers where people are doing business with the city, which is also a very public matter. The argument that it's not isn't plausible."

Politicians in California are not required to divulge their work schedules and can black out personal business, according to Scheer. But in November 2004, 83 percent of California voters passed Proposition 59, which made public access to government papers and meetings a right under the state constitution. Today, local and state politicians make common practice of handing over their schedules or calendars to the media on request.

In April of 2005, Villaraigosa publicly slammed then-Mayor James Hahn for not releasing his appointments calendar during their heated mayoral duel. For three weeks, Hahn took hits from the press for withholding his schedule. Villaraigosa pounced on the controversy and promised to be a "transparent" mayor. Along with exaggerated reports of corruption within the Hahn administration, the appointments calendar dustup hurt Hahn politically. Villaraigosa went on to defeat him. Scheer says Villaraigosa should now hold himself to his own 2005 standard.

DESPITE HIS RELUCTANCE to detail how he spends the purported 16-hour days that he chronically boasts about, Villaraigosa has attracted attention from the blogosphere and newspapers for his poor time management, and particularly for campaigning out of state on behalf of Hillary Clinton.

According to the calendar, Villaraigosa logged about 900 hours of work during a 10-week period from May 21 to August 1.

L.A. Weekly broke down those 900 hours into five categories. One category is largely ceremonial or public-relations: press conferences; public ceremonies; media interviews and tapings; and dinners, luncheons and awards. A second category is his blacked-out hours. A third category is gap time involving unlisted activities, such as continually moving from one event to another. A fourth category is his 10 out-of-town trips in 10 weeks. A fifth category determined by the *Weekly* is his time spent directly on actual city business.

Villaraigosa spent 88 hours on ceremonial and PR, or roughly 10 percent of his work time. His ceremonial time is spent on such events as dinners and luncheons with the Black Business Association and The East Los Angeles Community Union (TELACU).

His partially blacked-out trips to Israel, Miami, Hawaii, London, New York City, Chicago, Oakland, San Diego, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco soaked up 310 hours, or 34 percent of his workload. Among those hours, he held fund-raising events in four other cities to raise cash for his 2009 mayoral bid, and took a red-eye flight on July 7 to Washington, D.C., to introduce Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama at the League of United Latin American Citizens' annual convention. His other heavily blacked-out events, which the *Weekly* has learned include 14 fund-raisers, accounted for 186 hours, or 21 percent of his workload.

Together, then, the mayor spent 804 hours, or 89 percent of his work schedule, on ceremonial/PR, travel, blacked-out activities, gap time, fund-raising, personal issues and undisclosed "security" issues. On direct city business — such as signing legislation and meeting with city-department heads — his schedule shows the mayor spent 11 percent of his time.

"The mayor flies around the world like he's on a reality TV show," says a former California Democratic congressional staffer, who, like many other insiders, is afraid to be quoted because of the mayor's practice of cutting out those who criticize him.

He says that in contrast to the mayor, the 18 Congress members representing Los Angeles County typically spend 70 to 80 percent of their time on "hardcore" governing: talking with stakeholders, attending policy meetings, crafting legislation, holding public hearings and boning up on issues and studies, among other things.

One top aide to a former Los Angeles mayor says, "You have to be at your desk a lot. Otherwise, the general managers and the City Council are running the government for you. ... There's no substitute for sitting with a general manager. You can review things on paper, but it's not the best way. And you can manage to a degree on the telephone, but you can't lead."

Villaraigosa's work ratio, it appears, is backward. Although he frequently talks with Chief of Police William Bratton, he only occasionally meets with other department heads.

Greg Nelson, former head of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment and a longtime chief of staff to Councilman Joel Wachs, who served in City Hall from the time of Mayor Sam Yorty, says: "Other mayors spent greater amounts of time working on what fixes the city, or working with the public on what fixes the city. ... It's amazing how little the public knows about what politicians do with their time. I'd like to see a law that lets people know."

Eli Broad, one of the most civic-minded billionaires in Los Angeles and a supporter of the mayor, has been concerned about Villaraigosa's work habits, especially his campaigning in overdrive for Hillary Clinton. "I hope he spends more time and energy on the city," Broad told the *Weekly* earlier this

summer. Broad, who's involved in public-education reform in Los Angeles and nationally, added, "I think he'll realize his political success in the future relies on the job he does with the city."

All summer, though, Villaraigosa showed few signs of heeding Broad's advice. During the long July 4 weekend, three days after the mayor threw another staged and fluffy press conference — this one designed to lavish praise upon his nascent Partnership for L.A. Schools program, which will attempt to fix 10 of the city's lowest-performing schools in LAUSD — Villaraigosa very quietly hopped over to Hawaii.

The trip was not announced; the *Weekly* learned about it because another *Weekly* writer was returning from a European vacation that week, and happened to sit on an airplane next to a traveler who had just run into Villaraigosa — in Hawaii. As it turns out, it was yet another ceremonial event, honoring 125 graduate-school students at an exclusive gathering of the Academy of Achievement.

The event took place on the "idyllic beaches of Kailua-Kona on the Big Island of Hawaii," the academy's Web site reports. Political and cultural heavyweights included Nobel Peace Prize recipient Desmond Tutu, Pulitzer Prize winner Frank McCourt, basketball legend Bill Russell, Dell founder Michael S. Dell, actress Sally Field, rockers Chuck Berry and Brian Wilson, Service Employees International Union president Andy Stern and others.

Villaraigosa sat on a panel with two friends, former San Francisco mayor Brown and Chicago mayor Richard Daley, and, according to the academy's Web site, talked about "the challenges facing the modern city." He also handed out an award. The entire trip, which Szabo said was privately funded, was blacked out on the mayor's schedule from Thursday, July 3, to Sunday, July 6.

Ron Kaye, the former editor of the *Daily News*, has a big problem with Villaraigosa spending far too much time on these kinds of activities, even as L.A.'s troubles with middle-class flight, overbuilding, bad schools and other quality-of-life issues worsen.

"He's clearly enamored of running with an elite crowd. ... You have this poor kid from L.A., and he's living the life of a rich celebrity. It's a narcotic, especially in this town."

IN FACT, VILLARAIGOSA is not like any mayor in recent Los Angeles history. Mayor James Hahn, although criticized for sometimes keeping banker's hours and leaving City Hall by 5 p.m., hated traveling with an entourage and tended to avoid glitzy events, focusing his time much more heavily on city business. Mayor Richard Riordan was a hands-on problem solver deeply involved in the day-to-day operations of the city's sprawling utility, parks, roadways and police departments, many of which he reorganized and reformed during his sometimes-contentious eight years in office.

The last time Los Angeles had a mayor like Villaraigosa, so focused on the glitzy trappings of the job, and so distant from the sometimes dreary work inside City Hall, was when an aging Tom Bradley held the post in the early 1990s. In his final four years in office, Bradley was widely viewed as a political burnout who had overstayed his welcome — he ended up using his position in those final years to attend a seemingly endless series of ribbon-cuttings, awards banquets and dinner parties.

Although Villaraigosa continually makes a big deal of his workload — during the subway ride on June 25, he told reporters he works “18-hour days, seven days a week” — he’s no Michael Bloomberg, the hands-on mayor of New York City, according to Villaraigosa’s ally, billionaire Broad.

“Let’s put it this way,” Broad says. “Would I be more comfortable with a mayor like Richard Daley or Mike Bloomberg? The answer is yes. But Antonio doesn’t rank at the bottom of the list either.”

Yet the 11 percent of Villaraigosa’s time that the *Weekly* has identified as being spent in L.A. on actual city work — running, fixing or shaping government policies and actions — reveals that he frequently spends that limited time huddling with special-interest groups who have helped him attain higher office.

“In the end,” says critic Kaye, “the big question is, ‘Who’s really using Antonio’s power?’”

If his schedule is any guide, the answer is powerful labor unions, special-interest groups focused heavily on identity politics and race, and, to a lesser degree, business leaders. Labor unions have showered Villaraigosa with money, pouring hundreds of thousands of dollars into his 2005 campaign, and now jumping in to fatten his 2009 election coffers.

During the 10 weeks reviewed by the *Weekly*, Villaraigosa virtually shut out the two most active groups representing the broad middle class, which is waging boisterous quality-of-life battles on traffic and overdevelopment: homeowners associations and the city’s 88 neighborhood councils.

Nelson, former chief of staff to Joel Wachs, says the mayor’s self-imposed isolation from such residents is in stark contrast to former mayors Bradley, Riordan and even Hahn. Bradley regularly held “Meet the Mayor” chats, where anyone could show up to talk to him. Riordan regularly appeared at town-hall-style meetings. Of the current mayor, Nelson says, “I don’t remember Villaraigosa ever doing it,” unless it was “once or twice after he got elected.”

However, in the 10 weeks reviewed by the *Weekly*, Villaraigosa did give rare one-on-one time to Maria Elena Durazo, executive secretary/treasurer of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO; Tim Sands, president of the Los Angeles Police Protective League (one of the city’s most powerful government-employee labor unions); and Antonio Gonzalez, president of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project. The latter group, though purportedly nonpartisan, is, in fact,

tightly tied to Democratic Party leaders, and took media hits for peddling a \$30 Villaraigosa bobblehead doll on its Web site.

ONE OF THE MOST telling pieces of information in Villaraigosa's schedule is what doesn't appear in its 22 pages. Between May 21 and August 1, the mayor seems to have rarely met with Angelenos who do not represent racial, ethnic, lobbying or labor groups.

Jack Humphreville would love a few minutes of the mayor's time. A member of the Greater Wilshire Neighborhood Council, Humphreville sits on a group whose name is a mouthful — the Department of Water and Power's Memorandum of Understanding Oversight Committee, ordinary citizens who watch over DWP's rate hikes.

When the DWP, whose top managers and powerful, politically appointed commissioners all work at the pleasure of the mayor, was pursuing huge, controversial rate hikes and rate restructuring in May, June and July, Humphreville both called and wrote to Villaraigosa, but to no avail.

In the scheme of things, Humphreville is an unlucky Angeleno who can't do anything personally for Villaraigosa. He doesn't raise any political money for him, he can't introduce him to powerful players, and he can't drum up union members to get out the vote for Villaraigosa next year. All he can do is act as a citizen voice, questioning massive utility hikes and quiet surcharges that are pushing average household electric bills to almost \$800 a year by 2010.

"We've found the mayor's office to be nonresponsive," Humphreville says, making it clear that he was speaking only for himself and not for the committees on which he serves. After he was shut out by the bustling mayor during that key debate, "Nobody on the City Council and nobody in the mayor's office did a real analysis on the impact of the [rate] restructuring plan on single-family homes."

By the same token, Humphreville, who's active in the neighborhood-councils community — a growing, grass-roots force in city life that is mostly absent from the mayor's packed calendar — says, "The only time I've seen the mayor with the neighborhood councils is at the groups' fests, where the mayor comes in, makes a speech and leaves."

Humphreville may have rubbed Villaraigosa the wrong way when he asked DWP officials for a full financial breakdown of the mayor's recent trip to Israel, which, oddly in the view of some critics, the DWP paid for. Villaraigosa says he was learning green technology and airport security from the Israelis, justifying the cadre of 19 City Hall politicians and staff who accompanied him. But in the two months since that pricey trip, the DWP has not released those details, says Humphreville. "We haven't seen squat."

When told about how the mayor spent his time this summer, Humphreville responds, “What’s wisely? His goal is to be re-elected and raise a lot of money. He’s doing what’s best for him, although he likes to spin it another way.”

Throughout May and June, Villaraigosa was said to be gearing up for the July 1 takeover of 10 low-performing schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District through his Partnership for L.A. Schools program. But in fact the record shows the mayor was busy visiting New York City and Israel between June 9 and June 17, and he was holding 16 fund-raisers that month. Even so, Bill Ring still hoped to hear from Villaraigosa. “We were never contacted,” says Ring. The father is the former chairman and active member of the Parent Collaborative, a group funded by LAUSD that brings together all the major parents’ organizations in the nation’s second-largest public-school system.

The Parent Collaborative is considered by many to be the key resource for parental feedback, especially for Villaraigosa, now that he is apparently making decisions at 10 troubled schools about how to educate people’s kids. Ring says Villaraigosa has never asked to meet anyone from the Parent Collaborative, although they have sent the mayor letters.

Marshall Tuck, CEO of the Partnership, met with Ring and another Parent Collaborative member in the fall of 2007 — almost a year ago — but, Ring says, “Nothing came out of it.” He isn’t expecting to hear from the mayor soon. “I think there’s a perception that the mayor has other things on his mind,” says Ring.

In June and July, Villaraigosa did have the time, however, to send out two letters to solicit his latest round of campaign contributions. The June letter said he’d moved Los Angeles “forward in becoming the greenest and most efficient big city in the world.” The July letter boasted about how he was transforming “L.A. into the cleanest and greenest big city in America.”

Not so, says Tom Ford, one of the top environmentalists in the region.

Ford, through his work as executive director of Santa Monica Baykeeper, protects and restores Santa Monica Bay, San Pedro Bay and other waterways throughout Los Angeles County. He says Los Angeles is nowhere near the “greenest city” in the world, or the United States, as Villaraigosa has lately begun to claim.

Some 60 percent of the electrical power supply for L.A. “comes from out-of-state coal-burning,” says Ford, who was an enthusiastic supporter of the mayor when he ran in 2005. “It’s bad for air quality and bad for the water supply.”

He is still waiting for his first face-to-face with the mayor. “I have not engaged in any personal encounters with the mayor,” he says wryly.

Villaraigosa's continual snubbing of the environmental community, Ford says, has left it with a fading respect for the mayor. "Support for Villaraigosa is on the wane," Ford says. Some environmentalists have given up waiting for an invite to the mayor's office, where Villaraigosa and his inner circle of density hawks have proved to be far more available to powerful insider groups promoting more land development, construction and chain stores.

Says Ford: "We don't spend a lot of time talking about getting to see the mayor anymore."

THE DAY HE SNUBBED the Chinese journalists, Villaraigosa took an escalator up from the underground North Hollywood Metro Red Line station and headed for the Metro press conference, a nonevent involving scant news at which he praised the six new Rapid Bus lines.

He reached street level and his eyes seemed to grow wide — a half-dozen or so TV cameras were waiting for him on this slow news day. The mayor yelled out, "I love this job!" and a reporter tossed back, "Why?"

Villaraigosa turned and said, "The city has given me more than I ever expected growing up, when you consider where I came from." The mayor was about to explain further, maybe even go into his well-known story of coming from a tough area in East L.A., but his attention turned to the press photographers and the moment passed.

Villaraigosa could have said a lot of things about why he loved his job — he could talk about how it gives him a chance to turn Los Angeles around, or he could say his power lets him fight for ordinary citizens.

Instead, the mayor, who will soon be enshrined in wax at Madame Tussaud's, came back to himself and how he feels. Whether Villaraigosa realized it or not, his answer was all about him.