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Mayor to reap spoils of election victories

The city expects to get billions in bond money and Villaraigosa will have clout in D.C.

By Duke Helfand
Times Staff Writer

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His name did not appear on any ballot and he skipped an important election-night celebration with fellow Democrats. But Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa had plenty to appreciate in the results of this week's elections.

Thanks to the passage of state bond measures, the city expects to soon snare billions of dollars in infrastructure money that will allow Villaraigosa to shape his vision of an eco-friendly metropolis with less traffic, more affordable housing, new trees and perhaps a subway to the sea.

Meanwhile, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's victory on the same ballot means that California's top job will be vacant in four years, clearing a path for Villaraigosa if he elects to go that route.

Even the national news was positive for the mayor, as his Democratic Party swept back into power in Washington, where Villaraigosa is regarded in some quarters as a comer, a Latino version of Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, an African American.

Immediately after Tuesday's elections, Villaraigosa headed for the nation's capital, where he attended a dinner for Mexico's president-elect, Felipe Calderon. But on Thursday, the mayor was back at his rounds, holding news conferences and reflecting on the election results, while carefully demurring on the implications for himself.

"My focus is not me and a national platform," he insisted in an interview between stops on a busy day. "My focus is the city of Los Angeles ... using my bipartisan relationships at a state and national level to benefit a city that for too long hasn't gotten its fair share."

Villaraigosa started the day with a news conference in a bunker-like office beneath City Hall, touting an automated signal system that allows transportation officials to control traffic at three dozen congested intersections.

Talk of traffic lights might be a conversation killer in some circles, but Villaraigosa

enthusiastically plugged the high-tech initiative and spoke about public works possibilities from new bond money.

"I am very, very excited to say that ... we're going to have the money to synchronize all of the lights in the city of Los Angeles," he said.

Villaraigosa said the Los Angeles area would reap an estimated \$1 billion in state bond money to pay for transportation construction projects, allowing him to make good on his oft-repeated pledge to begin extending the Red Line subway west along Wilshire Boulevard to the Pacific Ocean, an idea that he doggedly champions even in the face of widespread skepticism.

"Building the subway to the sea will be a reality," he told reporters in the traffic-signal office under City Hall.

Villaraigosa also said that voter-approved bonds would pay to clean up the Los Angeles River, while some of the money would fund more affordable housing for the homeless, low-income families and others in need.

Villaraigosa was working on three hours of sleep when he met reporters, having returned to Los Angeles on Thursday morning after attending the dinner for Calderon.

In an interview later in the day, he spoke about what he thought was the poor timing of a \$1-billion affordable-housing bond, which Los Angeles voters rejected Tuesday. He pledged to seek another housing bond within two years.

In the meantime, he said he would lobby state and federal officials for more public works money — a task that he suggested would be easier in light of this week's returns.

"L.A. will get its fair share," he said. "Make no mistake about it, because I intend to spend a lot of time in Sacramento, in Washington, now that we have a majority that's going to understand the needs of infrastructure in our cities."

Since he took office, Villaraigosa has been courting Democratic leaders in Washington to secure federal money and approvals for projects such as the Red Line subway extension.

In recent months, the mayor has responded to requests from Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-San Francisco), the presumed new House speaker, and Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.), expected to become Senate majority leader, to campaign for candidates in New Mexico and Arizona.

While in Washington, he called to congratulate them.

"I'm very, very close to both of them," he said Thursday with a grin.

Villaraigosa's efforts have helped earn the affection of those and other influential Democrats, and, as a result, he is emerging as a notable figure in what is now the nation's majority party — as a bilingual Latino with a compelling personal story of overcoming a troubled youth with a single mother in poverty.

He is sometimes mentioned in the same breath as Obama and as a potential Cabinet choice if a Democrat is elected president in two years.

"He's like one of the star minor league players that you're expecting to be an all-star," said Chris Lehane, a Democratic consultant who served as former Vice President Al Gore's press secretary. "Once you make that jump, you have to hit major league pitching, but the expectation is that he will."

Villaraigosa refused to bite at those predictions Thursday. Instead, he touted his programs and made his stops, ticking off one event after another. "I've always believed, if you do a great job, you'll have unlimited opportunities," he said.

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