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Mayor rides the SU

Villaraigosa promotes the use of
By Duke Helfand
Times Staff Writer

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From the moment he took office nearly 18 months ago, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa made traffic gridlock a cause celebre — exhorting Angelenos to help solve the problem by forsaking their cars whenever possible.

"You've got to use public transit," Villaraigosa said just last week while unveiling an automated signal system to help unclog busy intersections. "You can't keep on pointing to someone else and saying it's their responsibility."

But Villaraigosa's own travel habits don't match his public pronouncements.

The mayor rarely, if ever, takes the bus or the train to work. Instead, he rides around town in a GMC Yukon chauffeured by a Los Angeles police officer who doubles as a bodyguard.

Unlike many others in Los Angeles, Villaraigosa has easy access to public transportation.

He lives just one block from Wilshire Boulevard, one of the city's most accessible and heavily traveled public transit corridors and one where, he often says, he would like to extend the subway.

No one, of course, expects the ultra-busy mayor to step on a bus or train every time he visits a school or holds a news conference, as he travels from one end of the sprawling city to the other. But that's not to say some regular use isn't feasible, transit riders say.

Just about any morning, the mayor could catch a bus on Metro Rapid route 720 at Wilshire and Crenshaw boulevards, transfer to the nearby Red Line subway and arrive at City Hall in about the time it takes to shower, shave and eat a bowl of cereal.

To gauge the trip, a Times reporter caught the 8:31 a.m. bus Monday down the street from Villaraigosa's official residence in Windsor Square.

The time to City Hall was 44 minutes. Along the route, bus riders and subway regulars

sounded off about the mayor's commuting habits.

"Get out and ride the transit like you tell everyone else — not just a day, but a week or two," scolded Jackie Sanders, 39, as she bounced around the crowded Metro Rapid 720. It was the last of three buses she rides every morning from Baldwin Village to Koreatown, where she is studying to become a pharmacy technician.

The view from underground had a different shading.

George Lee, a mainstay on the Red Line between Koreatown and downtown, said Villaraigosa is missing a superb opportunity to bond with citizens of Los Angeles in air-conditioned trains that offer ample seating and a smooth ride.

Lee, who lives just blocks from the mayor and works at a temporary employment agency downtown, said he takes the train also because it saves money on gas and parking.

"Instead of being in your car and being sheltered from other people, you get to interact with other cultures," said Lee, 38. "It gives us a chance to say hello and communicate with other people. We're not meant to stay in cars."

Villaraigosa, who sits on the L.A. County Metropolitan Transportation Authority board, insisted that he practices what he preaches.

He pointed out that he takes a bus, train or light rail about once a month from one event to another despite a hectic calendar that regularly crams half a dozen events into his day.

"I'd like to do more, but my problem is I have to go all over the city," the mayor said Monday while sitting in the Yukon before an appearance in Watts. "It's very tough because of my schedule."

Other public officials have their own takes on getting around the congested city while on an overloaded schedule.

Wendy Greuel, who chairs the City Council's Transportation Committee and lives in Studio City, said she takes the Red Line or carpools with her chief of staff once a week and takes the subway to Hollywood or downtown on the weekends with her family to see movies or attend cultural events.

"I have to walk the walk," Greuel said. "I have to take public transit if I am asking others to do it. As elected officials, we have to set an example."

But Councilman Herb Wesson, another Transportation Committee member, said he does not take buses or trains because, like the mayor, his days are so packed and the distances he must travel are so great.

"Given the type of work I do, it just doesn't work for me to take public transportation," said Wesson, who noted that he does ride the subway when he visits New York because it is so

convenient. "I've taken the Red Line once that I can remember, maybe twice."

He added: "When I think about it, I believe that we do have a responsibility from a symbolic standpoint."

Los Angeles' public transportation system is a work in progress and does not yet reach into corners of the far-flung city.

Officials say help is on the way: They expect to snare a large portion of nearly \$20 billion in transportation bonds approved by state voters last week.

The money would pay to expand rail systems, synchronize traffic lights, improve roads and other measures aimed at reducing what is arguably one of Los Angeles' biggest urban headaches.

Those ideas resonated with commuters on the bus Monday, but they also wanted the mayor to get a firsthand look at commuting problems.

"At least he should see how long it takes to go from his house to downtown," said Sanders, the pharmacy trainee on her third bus of the morning. "It's just so congested, and sometimes you end up on the wrong one."

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duke.helfand@latimes.com

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