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Optimism on Villaraigosa's 30/10 initiative

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Despite the Democrats' losses in November, the mayor's proposal is to compress a 30-year public transportation expansion into 10 years has wide endorsement.

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Looking to the year ahead, Los Angeles' civic agenda is likely to be dominated by continuing fiscal stress, but nothing City Hall can do for the local economy will have a greater impact than vigorously pushing Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's 30/10 initiative in the next Congress.

The mayor's 30/10 proposal grows out of L.A. County voters' approval of Measure R, which assigns 30 years of revenue from an incremental sales tax increase to finance projects that will dramatically expand public transit, from the Westside to the San Gabriel Valley. Villaraigosa and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority have proposed that those guaranteed funds be used to secure enough federal bridge financing to build the enumerated projects in one decade rather than three.

The benefits to the economy, the environment and the county's livability are clear and convincing: Expanded transit provides growth while reducing gridlock. It creates good-paying jobs and enhances public health through pollution reduction.

President Obama has referred to 30/10 as a model of local self-reliance and federal encouragement, "a template for the nation."

That's why the initiative has been enthusiastically endorsed by his administration, Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) and key House Democrats with influence on transit funding. Still, there's been a tendency to assume that 30/10 has stalled since the president's party — and that of the mayor — lost its House majority in the next Congress and narrowed its advantage in the Senate.

The elections make 30/10's road more difficult but not impossible. Though it's true that Rep. James L. Oberstar (D-Minn.) lost his seat and the chairmanship of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Oregon Rep. Peter A. DeFazio, another strong 30/10 enthusiast, will remain the ranking minority member. Equally important, the incoming Republican chairman, Rep. John L. Mica (R-Fla.) is a strong backer of precisely the sort of public-private partnership 30/10 represents.

If ever there were a proposal ripe for the bipartisanship Obama says he hopes to cultivate in the next Congress, it is 30/10, which encourages local initiative and allows for further economic

stimulus through growth that doesn't add to the federal deficit.

Jeff Carr, Villaraigosa's chief of staff, told me this week that Los Angeles is building its renewed push for the initiative around those facts. "There's no question that we're operating in a different environment," he said, "but we're not letting up even slightly on the gas pedal. We're only changing our course."

Carr points out that it's important to recall that 30/10 is not "an all-or-nothing proposition" and that! already Measure R has generated more than half a billion dollars for the Crenshaw light-rail line and vital federal waivers that will significantly reduce the overall cost of the Wilshire subway extension.

Since November, the emphasis has shifted from creation of a federal infrastructure bank to gaining bipartisan support for private sector bonds whose interest rates would be federally subsidized, with the principal to be repaid from Measure R tax revenue. It's a formula already in use for school construction.

As MTA board member and mayoral transit advisor Richard Katz told me this week, "We're proposing to put 80% local money on the table and only asking Washington to put up 20% in the form of subsidies, which is a reversal of the usual formula" for transit projects. That alone, he said, "should keep this package in play."

Moreover, Katz pointed out, with the new GOP majority at least rhetorically committed to moving away from funding local projects through earmarks, L.A. "is presenting a formula for funding transit projects that doesn't rely" on that unpopular mechanism.

Two weeks ago, according to Katz, Mica's staff presented a briefing that laid out 10 things the incoming Transportation Committee chairman would like to see in any federal highway or transit bill. "Two of those," Katz said, "were our transit bond and TIFIA expansion proposals." (TIFIA, or the Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act, is a now-ubiquitous federal mechanism that provides low-cost financing for large-scale infrastructure projects.)

"After the mayor recently testified before Sen. Boxer's committee," Katz added, "the ranking Republican, Sen. Jim Inhofe, inserted expanded written remarks into the record supporting our TIFIA expansion concept."

For those reasons, Katz said, "we think we still have a very good story to tell." The challenge is to make sure that the right people hear it.

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