

L.A. Mayor-Elect Antonio Villaraigosa at CNUXIII

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Antonio Villaraigosa (Los Angeles Mayor-Elect)

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Good evening New Urbanists! I'm happy to be among friends and fellow travelers on the voyage to better public policy in L.A., and I'm truly honored to accept your Civic Arts award for transportation.

So, welcome to Los Angeles. I know we're technically in Pasadena, but you're here to talk about the "polycentric city," right? From that perspective, it can be argued that Pasadena is just another one of L.A.'s many centers.

From the perspective of someone like me, who feels that our urban areas need to work for the middle class if we're going to make them work for everyone, a place like Pasadena is key. Pasadena is one of the places a part of L.A.'s middle class went. I want to make Los Angeles a place they'll want to return to some day – in a manner more lasting than just taking a ride on the Gold Line - and I need your help.

As you know, the City of Los Angeles is in the middle of a refreshing discussion about how to go about choosing a new Planning Director, and what kind of person it should be. I believe the final choice will fall to me and, truth be told, I would like that person to at least be someone who understands and can advocate for the kinds of ideas the Congress for the New Urbanism is talking about here this week. That's because I believe how a city plans for its physical development greatly affects the well-being of the whole city in every sense of the term.

There are some who argue that Los Angeles has at times been blessed with some pretty forward-thinking planning. Charles Mulford Robinson's Beaux Arts plan. The engineering that built the now historic bridges over the Los Angeles River. The vision that created great neighborhoods along a vast network of streetcar lines. The Allied Architects Civic Center Plan in the 1920s. And the legendary Olmstead Brothers plan to green the city in the 1930s. Some of these ideas came to fruition, some didn't. But what they suggest is that even "back in the day," the ideas that form the New Urbanism were relevant to building a city. I guess they were "the Old Urbanism." Whatever you call them, they were the kinds of ideas that gave us most of what we consider great in Los Angeles, and some wistful visions of what might have been.

Since World War 2, we haven't done as well. There is the "Centers Concept," adopted 40 years ago as the central theme of the General Plan. As I understand it, the Centers Concept could work with New Urbanism, especially if it would have been accompanied by a serious commitment to restoring a real multi-modal transit system of the sort we

dismantled right after the war. But we didn't, and the Centers Concept fell into disrepute, as much a victim of sprawl as any other aspect of our quality of life.

The development patterns that made Los Angeles and its surrounding suburbs the poster child for sprawl were only partly the product of conscious decision-making. There was a deliberate effort to make L.A. a low-rise city, one where yards replaced parks as the requisite open space, and automobiles became integral to coping with daily life. I think we've all come to understand the shortcomings of that approach.

But Southern California also was founded on optimism, openness, energy and entrepreneurship. It was, and remains, blessed with sheer physical beauty, good weather, natural amenities and the vast potential of our diverse array of people. It's those people who I plan to ask to help me launch a new era of public life in Los Angeles beginning July 1st. I intend to rally them, and you, to help us envision our future, to focus on community and public service, and to restore our image in the world.

To do that in a way will not merely lead to a festival of parochialism and divisiveness will require the wisdom and leadership of people like the Congress for the New Urbanism. I am asking you to help me have an effective dialogue with the people, the planners, the developers and the urban designers of the city and the region. This dialogue will be educational, for professionals and amateurs alike. It will be informative. It will be cathartic. And it will be, I believe, transformational. Transformational because we are a polycentric city in need of a transformation. We need to become the city we are destined to be, the great world city of this century.

To do that we need to take on transformational issues. New Urbanism presents the ideal opportunity to do that by promoting several key elements:

First, there's good public transportation – multi-modal, with regional reach and neighborhood efficiency.

Second, we must complement transit with urban development that serves, and is served by, that kind of mobility. Development that promotes transit accessibility, social interaction, walkability, and better health and lifestyle habits.

Third, we must improve our schools, because I fervently believe that we will never make our city whole again as long as the public schools are failing our children and families. We need schools that serve their neighborhoods in a variety of ways, as academic centers, community resources, and safe havens for our kids.

Fourth, we need to rekindle the idea in peoples' minds that living closer to work, and vice-versa, is both acceptable and desirable, and necessary. Having so many people living an hour or more away from their job is a prescription for traffic congestion, dirty air, reduced productivity, and community and family dysfunction.

Fifth, we can make everything we do more environmentally sensitive by being mindful of how it's designed and how it functions in the real world. Sustainable design and sensible resource management is good for the environment, good for the economy and good for our well-being.

Sixth, we will continue to seek increased clarity and simplicity in our regulatory and permit processes.

Finally, we must make the planning process one that fosters that progress instead of impeding it, as it has so often in recent decades. The planning process must aspire to building consensus, both at the neighborhood level and the citywide level. The process should allow communities to envision their collective aspirations and feel that there's a real chance to achieve them. That dialogue I spoke of a few minutes ago - the one that you will help me carry on throughout the city and the region - is crucial to making all this a reality.

As Los Angeles looks for a new Planning Director, there has been a lot of talk about vision. I'm all for vision, of course. But even transformational goals don't always require vision to accomplish. Sometimes they just require hard work and determination, qualities I think everyone in this room understands every bit as well as vision. So, I'll close by saying once again that I need your help. Spend the next three days seeing this great place, learning about its problems and potential. Think about how what you know can inform what we do to make Los Angeles everything it can and should be. And be ready to join me and the people of Los Angeles as we roll up our sleeves and make a new city - a new city steeped in the best traditions of what came before and the best ideas for a future we will invent day by day with everything we do.

Thank you, and have a great Congress!