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ALL'S FARE FOR FLYING MAYOR ANTONIO'S TRAVEL BUDGET IS 10 TIMES THAT OF HAHN, BUT FANS SAY IT'S WORTH IT

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Byline: BETH BARRETT Staff Writer

After months of galloping across the city at a frenetic pace, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa now has accelerated his trotting across the country.

In the last month alone, one of the nation's most recognizable and effervescent mayors has jetted to the East Coast three times -- nearly as many major trips as he took during his entire first six months in office.

And even while Villaraigosa has cracked down on city workers' travel, his office has budgeted \$200,000 for treks by the mayor and his staff -- 10 times the last annual travel budget of former Mayor James Hahn.

"I said early on that both Sacramento and Washington, D.C., would be second homes for me," Villaraigosa said last week. "That's where we get all our money."

Villaraigosa, council members and others say the journeys are a key part of the mayor's job, raising national awareness of Los Angeles and lobbying to ensure the city and county get their fair share of funding from the state and nation's capitols.

George Passantino, a senior fellow at the private, nonprofit Reason Foundation think tank, said taxpayers should weigh how much benefits them and how much benefits the mayor's political ambitions.



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``What are (taxpayers) getting out of it? There's certainly a case to be made where travel to advocate on behalf of constituents is warranted, whether it's to Sacramento or Washington, D.C.," said Passantino. ``But whether showing up on television shows and various political fundraisers fits that mold, I'm not sure."

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Passantino said that Villaraigosa could make a case that wherever he goes -- even to Disneyland -- it's good for the city, ``but it seems like a name ID exercise to me. ... The city does a pretty good job of marketing itself without him showing up."

Gets attention

There is no denying, though, that when Villaraigosa travels he gets attention.

Councilman Jack Weiss said that in the nation's capital, where the mayor has been lobbying for federal transportation and other dollars, Villaraigosa is treated like a national leader.

Weiss said when he traveled to Washington in the past, as with Mayor Hahn, doors didn't swing open unless the delegation was accompanied by a congressional leader.

``There are these elevators that say things like `Senators Only,' ... but when you are walking with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, the elevator operators hold the doors open and say, `This way, Mr. Mayor.'"

Councilwoman Wendy Greuel, who has traveled with Villaraigosa to Sacramento, said he also gets red-carpet treatment there.

``He's a celebrity in Sacramento," Greuel said. ``This mayor knows Washington, D.C., and Sacramento is where the money is to fund police officers, transportation and economic development. He's demonstrating he'll do everything he can to get the resources for Los Angeles and our fair share."

Greuel said that Los Angeles historically has been shortchanged in state and federal funding and that Villaraigosa's stumping on behalf of the city is a departure from recent administrations.

Added Councilman Tom LaBonge, who supported Hahn for mayor, Villaraigosa has the style that Los Angeles needs right now to boost its national image. ``Now we're in love L.A. mode, and that's good."

Karen Sisson, deputy mayor of finance and performance innovation, said the mayor's travel budget reflects what Villaraigosa and his staff plan to do.

``This mayor, in particular, has been very active in chasing Los Angeles' fair share in both Sacramento and Washington, D.C., and that's

reflected in the budget," Sisson said.

Sisson said the value to being on the scene is that state and national lawmakers often are faced with immediate decisions on a host of priorities, and who wins can come down to having just looked someone in the eye and shaken a hand.

"It can be who's in your mind at the time," she said.

Villaraigosa's latest trip last week began in Sacramento to round up support for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's infrastructure bond measure and to meet with lawmakers over plans for local mayors to control the Los Angeles Unified School District.

It ended in Washington, D.C., where he joined members of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce and others to lobby on issues including transportation and housing.

Villaraigosa told San Fernando Valley business leaders Friday he was the first L.A. mayor in more than 30 years to participate in the event, known as the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce's Access D.C. Advocacy trip.

Brendan Huffman, who heads the Valley Industry and Commerce Association and was on the trip, said the mayor impressed business leaders with his inclusion and ability to maneuver the halls of Congress.

"Under Hahn, we were never really invited to go along with him," Huffman said. "He preferred to take his trips alone, and the business community felt it was working on its own."

Villaraigosa -- whose public image has been burnished with appearances on Newsweek cover, "American Idol," CNN and other national platforms -- now has a travel budget larger than that of most other big-city mayors.

Hard to compare

Direct comparisons are difficult to make. For example, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's personal wealth allows him to take only a \$1-a-year salary and to pay for all his own travel.

Bloomberg's travels, though, typically are short hops for the day to Washington, D.C., or New York's state capital, Albany, to lobby for the city's interests, said deputy press secretary Virginia Lam.

"His priority is New York City," Lam said.

Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley's office has a \$32,592 fiscal 2006 travel budget, said Lisa Schrader, spokeswoman for the city's Office of Budget Management.

But private sponsors pay for some mayoral trips. The Jewish Federation paid for Daley's recent visit to Israel and Jordan to review security measures and to market Chicago. The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations financed his trip to Beijing as city leaders considered bidding for the 2016 Summer Olympics.

Travel costs for San Jose's Mayor Ron Gonzales and his staff generally run no more than about \$25,000 per year.

In more than seven years, Gonzales has been out of the country just twice. His domestic travel is basically two to four trips to Washington, D.C., each year, said his communications director David Vossbrink.

San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders' travel budget was \$13,000 for fiscal

2006, with no private funding to augment it, said Kevin Klein, the mayor's press assistant.

``In March he went to (Washington) D.C. and New York. And they went to Long Beach one day, but they drove."''

Staff Writers Rick Orlov and Greg Wilcox contributed to this story.

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ANTONIO'S TRAVELS

Some of the trips Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has taken since being sworn into office last July:

July 19-21

Washington, D.C.

Briefing with lobbyists, meeting with senators and representatives, meeting with Congressional Hispanic Caucus, meeting with Department of Transportation Secretary Norm Mineta and others.

Aug. 29-30

Sacramento

Meetings with state senators and Assembly members.

Sept. 14

Washington, D.C.

Meetings with Congressional Hispanic Caucus and others.

Nov. 2

Detroit

Eulogy for civil-rights leader Rosa Parks. The mayor takes a private corporate jet, citing the short notice, and later pays Ameriquest the equivalent \$438 commercial fare out of his officeholder account.

Nov. 30-Dec. 1

Cambridge, Mass.

Presented a speech, ``The American Mayor: Challenges and Opportunities," at the Kennedy School Institute of Politics for Newly Elected Mayors.

Jan. 25-26

Washington, D.C.

U.S. Conference of Mayors, including breakfast with Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley, interviews with national publications and televised Spanish-language Democratic rebuttal to President George W. Bush's State of the Union address.

Feb. 21-22

Sacramento

Meeting with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, state senators and Assembly members.

March 19-21

New York City

Tour of city-run schools with Mayor Michael Bloomberg and others.

April 29

Philadelphia, Washington, D.C.

Democratic Senate annual Issues Conference keynote address after a hop to attend the White House Correspondents Association dinner.

May 4

Washington, D.C.

Support the Kennedy-McCain immigration bill, meeting with co-author Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., to discuss immigration and education issues. Also speaks at the 100th annual meeting of the American Jewish Committee on urban issues.

May 14-15

Sacramento, Washington, D.C.

State Capitol to discuss Schwarzenegger's \$36 billion infrastructure bond measure and proposal for local mayors to take control of Los Angeles Unified School District. Then on to the nation's Capitol with a delegation of local business leaders to discuss the state bond measures with federal lawmakers.

SOURCE: Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's daily calendars.

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ANTONIO'S TRAVELS (see text)

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