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## **First Person**

### **A Light in City Hall**

By Torie Osborn

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## A Light in City Hall

How one newcomer to the Los Angeles mayor's office mixed government with philanthropy to make change **BY TORIE OSBORN**

IN 2005, A NEW DAY ARRIVED in Los Angeles, when citizens elected the charismatic Antonio Villaraigosa as their mayor. Serving on his transition team, I remember surveying his winning coalition at a meeting: East and South Los Angeles organizers and West Side philanthropists; Asian and Armenian immigrant businesspeople; and corporate, labor, and nonprofit leaders from every culture and community.

"Come dream with me, Los Angeles," the new mayor said in his inaugural speech. And a great many of us did.

Mayor Villaraigosa sought creative solutions and silo busting inside and outside government. His signature phrase was "strategic partnership," and, unlike most government officials, his vision always included nonprofits and philanthropy. In short order, he hired me to a newly created position as liaison between the mayor's office and the philanthropic sector.

For 20 years before I took that post, I labored in the social sector, where my relationship to government zigzagged from advocate, to negotiator, to parallel funder. But never did our shared public-private concern for the common good or our work tackling the same issues (such as poverty or AIDS) result in joint planning or coordination. Some other cities were beginning to change that, and I wanted Los Angeles to join them.

True to my independent sector roots, I spent weeks conducting research for my position. I hoped to create a "new problem-solving civic philanthropy," in the words of Susan Berresford, who was then CEO of the Ford Foundation. Armed with a Durfee Foundation fellowship, a \$1 million grant from the Annenberg Foundation, and a part-time assistant funded by Wells Fargo & Company, I moved into my small City Hall office right next to the mayor and prepared to make history.

But as it turns out, history isn't made in a day.

### TWO PLANETS

My first few weeks at City Hall left me breathless (and sleepless), as I made the cultural jump from philanthropy to government. Philanthropy is quiet and thoughtful, and above all it values strategizing, planning, evaluating, and exercising the freedom to choose. But government is noisy, unruly, reactive, crisis driven, and tightly constrained. There are no exit strategies.

The first jolt to my nonprofit-trained system was witnessing the tragic results of "starve-the-beast" antigovernment fiscal policies. Unbelievably, the Los Angeles city government was far worse off than the chronically underfunded nonprofit sector: Nobody



had enough staff, and nobody had up-to-date technology. Within a few weeks, my assistant was reporting to three additional people who did not have enough staff-support dollars. People worked like heroic maniacs against ridiculous odds.

Meanwhile, federal and state dollars declined precipitously while needs skyrocketed. In four short years, for example, federal job-training funding for Los Angeles dropped from \$100 million to \$35 million. And 30 years of capped property taxes—the legacy of 1978's Proposition 13—had forced California cities to choose between investing in, say, fire or police departments. Los Angeles chose firefighters, whereas San Diego opted for police. And so San Diego burns while Los Angeles watches its children die in gang violence.

No wonder my government colleagues looked to philanthropy for financial support. I had told them about the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City, which is a

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fundraising office that supplements the annual New York City budget. In 2006, the fund had raised \$75 million.

But I knew that the idea wouldn't fly in Los Angeles. New York enjoys a long-standing civic partnership between its political and philanthropic elite. In Los Angeles, though, foundation leaders are wary of government. Over and over again, they recounted the sad tale of Pittsburgh, where foundations stepped up to fill a \$40 million shortfall in the city's budget, only to be asked to repeat the favor one year later.

"We are *not* government's ATM," one foundation executive said in a huff. Instead, the philanthropy leaders of Los Angeles wanted to lend their nonmonetary resources, such as policy and problem-solving know-how, convening power, and contacts. In exchange, they wanted me to help them cut through red tape and to shield them from absurd funding demands.

Philanthropy is quiet and thoughtful, and above all it values strategizing, planning, evaluating, and choosing. Government is noisy, unruly, reactive, and tightly constrained.

Taming government bureaucracy so that philanthropy can act, however, has proven to be an elusive goal. In 2006, for example, Latino immigrant families using a South Central farm had to relocate, leaving behind 100 fruit trees. The owner wanted to develop the property and was about to bulldoze the fruit trees when a local foundation trustee stepped in. Aware that Los Angeles lacks enough trees in public spaces, the philanthropist came up with the perfect idea: donate the fruit trees to one of Los Angeles' tree-starved parks.

Despite support from every elected office and the entire parks commission, the trustee's beautiful idea fell to the buzz saw of bureaucracy. An obscure regulation required fruit tree donors to deposit \$300,000 as protection against future liability. The trustee did not want to spend precious funds that way. As a result of the government's inflexibility, the trees ended up gracing the rich grounds of the private, suburban Huntington Gardens.

Layers of tough truth revealed themselves in another example. After the city rolled out a public safety initiative to clean up skid row, a coalition of service providers and advocates brought a seemingly easy dilemma to me. The police were ticketing homeless people on skid row for littering, but there weren't any trash cans! The advocates mapped out 11 street corners for trash bin placement, and I went to work.

But it took one full year to deliver the trash cans, during which time many more homeless people received littering tickets. Although the city had state bond funds to buy state-of-the-art, environmentally sound, damage-proof, \$400-a-pop trash cans, it had zero funds for additional trash pickup service. And no amount of political will could change that until the next fiscal year.

#### SOME SUCCESS

After a few months in my new job, I had this weird nightmare: My task was to figure out how to move a monstrous sloth mired in mud.

From a distance, the beast seemed indomitable, but as I approached, I saw hunger and desperation on its face. That remains my sharpest image of the tragedy of local government today.

A friend of mine says it is no coincidence that the word *labor* stands at the center of the word *collaborate*. Bridging divergent worlds takes a lot of work.

But things do move over time. Philanthropy has managed to play a critical role on two fronts in Los Angeles government: poverty and the environment.

On the poverty front, the mayor's "opportunity agenda" to fight poverty could not have happened without that Annenberg grant, which funded policy research, best practice convenings, and an unprecedented integration of budgets across five city departments to build housing for the poor. Three other foundations—Conrad N. Hilton, Weingart, and the California Endowment—have helped broker collaborations between Los Angeles city and county governments to end homelessness. Historically, those two government bodies have been more interested in suing each other than in working together. But steadily, they are cooperating to implement housing projects

for the chronically homeless.

And on the environment front, the Liberty Hill Foundation united scrappy environmental justice groups with sophisticated mainstream organizations to form GREEN LA, a coalition that is helping to determine the city's green policy agenda. Partly because of GREEN LA's efforts, the city's green building code, rainwater reclamation plan, climate action goals, and Port of Los Angeles clean truck plan are making Los Angeles a bold international leader in environmental policy.

As I write this, the world has turned. America has a new community-organizer-in-chief who understands the need to engage all hands on deck to solve our problems. The economic crisis is also bringing us together. Foundations are suffering losses in their endowments, and, many hundreds of meeting hours later, they are feeling more empathy for government. And the federal government may finally fund solutions for urban problems that have been left to fester far too long. Both government and foundation leaders are talking about fiscal reform—even tax reform. And in Los Angeles, more former nonprofit leaders have joined the mayor's senior staff. To support a public gang prevention program this past year, two foundation leaders hit the phones and raised more than \$1 million in about six hours.

While Mayor Villaraigosa is entering his second term, I am moving back to my true home in the nonprofit world. But I am leaving a legacy in city hall: a new Office of Strategic Partnership, which three foundations (Ahmanson, Weingart, and Annenberg) and the mayor's office co-created. Its mission includes gang reduction, education, and the mayor's international relations agenda. It has the first precondition for success—several staff!—and hired a new director this summer. The foundations are looking ahead to institutionalizing the office beyond the current mayor's tenure. And I am satisfied to report that a new "problem-solving civic philanthropy" is finally coming to life in Los Angeles. ■