THE BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE:
Is Congress Shortchanging L.A.?

Over the last several years we have been singing a certain song, and many people now know the chorus. The Los Angeles area does not receive its fair share of money from Washington, D.C.—nor are we effectively organized to get it. We receive only 79 cents on every dollar we send, while many other areas receive more than they give. It just isn’t fair and needs to be changed.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa deserves a lot of praise for his recent efforts in Washington, D.C. to secure more of our region’s fair share of federal transportation dollars. We hope he will join us next spring as the Chamber takes our delegation to Washington for Access D.C., an annual trip run by the Chamber that has grown each year for the past four years. We take business, political and community leaders from throughout the region to Washington to lobby as a group for our interests.

When it comes to transportation, we’re definitely a donor state and a donor region. This, despite the fact that California’s transportation has a tremendous impact on the national economy. Forty-three percent of the nation’s imports enter our country through Los Angeles County, and if our transportation system crumbles into gridlock, so will our national economy.

Thanks to the efforts of Mayor Villaraigosa and our congressional delegation, we will soon be receiving 92 cents back on each dollar generated by federal gas taxes—a modest gain.

The federal transportation dollars earmarked for L.A. County are not remarkable, nor is the success in obtaining a few more dollars than years past—especially when you compare the share of transportation dollars between Kern County (population 745,000), which received $722 million, to L.A. County (population 10 million), which received $625 million.

Kern County has no seaports, no international airports, nor any significant homeland security threat. So why do our neighbors to the north strike gold?

Because their single member of Congress serves as chair of arguably the most important committee in the House of Representatives, the Ways & Means Committee, which helps dol out billions of federal dollars.

L.A. County, with a population greater than 41 states in America, has one member on Ways & Means, Xavier Becerra. L.A. County has one member on the Transportation Committee, Juanita Millender-McDonald. L.A. County has one member on the powerful Appropriations Committee, Lucille Roybal-Allard.

Where is L.A. County’s representation? We have great representation on committees that do not allocate money. Five, to be exact, on the House International Relations Committee (none of whom voted for CAFTA, incidentally) and four on the House Judiciary Committee. But not nearly enough on the committees that can improve our infrastructure.

Yes, L.A. County is a Democratic stronghold and the Democrats are in the minority. But that is no excuse and has not kept Lucille Roybal-Allard, Juanita Millender-McDonald and Xavier Becerra from sending significant federal dollars our way. They have each been able to work with their Republican colleagues, some of whom are more committed than ever to secure federal funds for L.A.’s Gold Line and other important projects. We truly appreciate their efforts.

What does get in their way is too many of their colleagues having duplicative priorities.

Do we really need four members of our delegation on the Judiciary Committee and five on the International Relations Committee? Yes, these are important committees, but there’s little to show for it in terms of direct benefits to Los Angeles. (To be fair, we commend Rep. Howard Berman, who is the second-highest-ranking member on the Judiciary, for fighting for $130 million for extending the HOV lane on the 405 freeway).

We need more members of our congressional delegation to get on the right committees and diversify our portfolio, so that when our charismatic and energetic mayor lobbies Congress for federal dollars, his efforts can be maximized to the fullest extent—whether it be for transportation, education, health care, law enforcement or other funding needs.

And that’s the Business Perspective.
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