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From the Los Angeles Times

## Mayor spent millions on school board races

Villaraigosa's efforts to gain school allies breaks record. He won't have to cover LAUSD legal fees.

By David Zahniser and Joel Rubin

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Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa spent \$3.5 million on behalf of three candidates who recently won seats on the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education, breaking the record set eight years ago by then-Mayor Richard Riordan, another politician who installed a board majority, according to reports filed Tuesday.

Villaraigosa turned in spending reports for his school board campaign committee, Partnership for Better Schools, on the same day his newly installed board allies abandoned a plan to ask a court to force the mayor to reimburse the school district for up to \$300,000 in attorneys' fees incurred during a legal battle over mayoral control.

L.A. Unified prevailed twice in court, securing two rulings that found the state education bill that Villaraigosa won in the Legislature last year was unconstitutional. Nevertheless, the board on Tuesday voted 5 to 2 behind closed doors not to seek some of its attorneys' fees in court, deciding instead to ask Villaraigosa to contribute \$250,000 to the district voluntarily.

School board President Monica Garcia, a close Villaraigosa ally, said she wanted to move past the acrimony that had marked the bitter battle between the mayor and the school board.

"This is absolutely about us being focused on our work and moving forward," she said. "This is not about not wanting to challenge the mayor."

The board backed down on its legal bills even though the Committee for Government Excellence and Accountability, the fundraising committee set up by Villaraigosa to defend his education bill in court, has \$347,000 left in its account. Since April 28, the committee has spent at least \$17,000 on polling.

Even before the new board members took their seats, the district had missed the chance to seek an estimated \$700,000 reimbursement from Villaraigosa for legal fees it paid earlier this year during the court battle.

"It is inconceivable that L.A. Unified ... would stick taxpayers with this bill when it has the option to seek private money," said David Wolfe, Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Assn. legislative director.

Villaraigosa campaign treasurer Stephen Kaufman said the mayor was not prepared Tuesday to spend any of his campaign money on L.A. Unified's legal bills — but insisted the funds would go toward education.

Villaraigosa allies gained a majority on the board last month, when nonprofit group administrator Yolie Flores Aguilar, retired Supt. Richard Vladovic and city prosecutor Tamar Galatzan joined Garcia, until then the mayor's one ally on the board.

Partnership for Better Schools spent at least \$2.2 million on behalf of Galatzan, just shy of the \$2.3 million that Riordan paid in 1999 to elect a slate of four new board members.

The mayor's campaign committee also helped Vladovic, who won a seat that was vacated by departing board member Mike Lansing. Vladovic received more than \$544,000 from the committee — two-thirds of the total spent by his campaign.

To help his candidates, Villaraigosa turned to an array of companies seeking to do business at City Hall, including real estate developers, media companies and potential tenants at Los Angeles International Airport.

Partnership for Better Schools received \$25,000 from Entravision Communications Corp., a Santa Monica-based Spanish-language media firm that, according to its lobbying forms, is seeking new "advertising opportunities" with the city.

The committee also took \$50,000 from Panda Restaurant Group, which hopes to obtain restaurant concessions at LAX. And it received \$100,000 from New York City-based Fig Central LLC, which is seeking permission from Villaraigosa's appointees on the Planning Commission to build an 860-unit condominium complex across the street from Staples Center.

The Planning Commission will meet Aug. 9 to discuss the project, which consists of two towers and calls for a 222-room hotel. Fig Central wrote the mayor two checks: one on March 5 and a second on May 14 — one day before Galatzan's runoff election against incumbent Jon Lauritzen and Vladovic's runoff against retired administrator Neal Kleiner.

Another campaign contributor doing business with City Hall was Thomas Unterman, who gave Villaraigosa's school board committee \$35,000 between January and April. Unterman heads Rustic Canyon Partners, which went last year before the city's pension board — four of whose seven members were appointed by Villaraigosa.

The pension board voted in January 2006 to commit \$5 million to a partnership of Rustic Canyon and Fontis Partners, a private-equity venture fund focusing on businesses in Latino and emerging ethnic markets.

The size of the contributions dismayed Robert Stern, who heads the Center for Governmental Studies, a campaign finance watchdog group. Stern argued that a majority of the contributors did so because they want something out of City Hall, not the school district.

"City contractors are obviously giving because the mayor is asking," Stern said. "It's a business decision. It's not because they're interested in the school board."

Kaufman sharply disagreed, saying donors to the committee gave money because they're concerned about education.

"They share the mayor's belief that we have to fundamentally reform our schools," he said.

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