

What We Learned from Voters' 2009 Rejection of Villaraigosa's Solar Initiative (Measure B)

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LA WATCHDOG--Ten years ago, on March 3, 2009, just over 50% of the voters of the City of Los Angeles rejected Measure B, Mayor Villaraigosa's solar initiative to have the Department of Water and Power install 400 megawatts of solar power within the City limits.

This ballot measure was first proposed by then City Council President Eric Garcetti on October 15, 2009. Within three weeks, the City Council approved placing the measure on the ballot with little to no input from DWP's management or engineers.

Approval of Measure B by the voters was considered a slam dunk. After all, Mayor Villaraigosa and the entire City Council endorsed the deal. Environmental stalwarts, including the Sierra Club, National Resources Defense Council, League of Conservation Voters, Coalition for Clean Air, and Heal the Bay, were enthusiastic backers along with the American Lung Association and the League of Women Voters.

And Union Boss d'Arcy, the business manager of IBEW Local 18, DWP's domineering union, would bankroll the campaign.

But the wheels started to come off the bandwagon when voters became aware that this measure was a political payback by Villaraigosa for generous contributions by the IBEW to his 2005 mayoral campaign. This measure would provide the IBEW and its notoriously inefficient work crews with a sole source, no bid contract that would end up costing Ratepayers billions extra. This would cause rates to surge.

In November, The Times editorialized, "This rush to the ballot has a scent of swindle about it."

In December, Controller Laura Chick said on public radio, "The process stinks here."

Also, in December, Times reporter David Zahniser wrote that Garcetti covered up a tax payer funded consulting report that said that this program was "extremely risky," "considerably more expensive than was being portrayed by DWP," and that "DWP does not have the capability to adequately take on the program."

In December, the IBEW unsuccessfully sued the signers of the opposition argument which was perceived as an inappropriate bullying tactic.

DWP lost what credibility it had left, which was not much to begin with, when its consultant issued a biased report that was ridiculed because its conclusion of affordability was based on unrealistic assumptions.

In February, shortly before the election, The Times urged a no vote on Measure B.

There are lessons to be learned from the defeat of Measure B, especially as it pertains to Garcetti's plan to phase out the three coastal natural gas fired generating stations, to reduce the Department's dependence on fossil fuels, and to have the City be carbon neutral by 2050.

Most importantly, Garcetti and the Department must be open and transparent about this ambitious program and provide Angelenos with straight forward information on a timely basis, especially given the corruption issues involving City Hall and its pay-to-play culture.

While Garcetti has given lip service to affordability and lower bills, we have not seen any information from Garcetti or DWP about the many billions this initiative will cost or the impact on rates. However, knowledgeable sources have indicated that this very expensive and ambitious program will result in a doubling or tripling of rates for the first two thirds of the program and exponentially more in its final stages.

If this is the case, the average monthly power bill will increase by an estimated \$50 to \$100 for renters and \$150 to \$300 for the average homeowner. And heaven help you if you live in the Valley on a hot summer day.

The City and the Department must also keep us informed as to the incremental cost to eliminate a ton of greenhouse gas, recognizing that the City's goal is to be carbon neutral by 2050. As such, there may be more efficient uses of our money, especially when the Department begins its efforts to eliminate the last third of its use of fossil fuels. For example, rather than investing in very expensive energy storage systems such as lithium batteries, it might be more cost efficient for the City to direct our money to the transportation sector, the City's largest source of greenhouse gas.

To encourage transparency, Mayor Garcetti should heed the following words of wisdom attributed to Abraham Lincoln and uttered by a supporter of Measure B after its rejection: "You can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all of the time."

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SOLAR ENERGY AND JOB CREATION PROGRAM. CHARTER AMENDMENT AND ORDINANCE MEASURE B

Shall the Charter and Administrative Code be amended to authorize creation of a Los Angeles Department of Water and Power program to require production of at least 400 megawatts of solar power energy by 2014; provide for voluntary participation in the program by commercial, industrial, and institutional customers to allow installation of solar power systems on their property which would be operated and maintained by the Department in exchange for potential incentives; establish a jobs program and training academy to meet program participation demand; provide contract bid preferences for local solar power equipment manufacturers; require quarterly oversight committee reports and annual City Controller audit; and utilize a variety of funding mechanisms?

<https://www.citywatchla.com/index.php/la-watchdog/17227-what-we-learned-from-voters-2009-rejection-of-villaraigosa-s-solar-initiative-measure-b>