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Mexico City Reaches Milestone in Efforts to Curb Pollution

by *Carlos Navarro*

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Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard, who has gained a strong reputation for his commitment to making the Mexican capital a model for environmental protection, announced in late July that his administration has come close to meeting a significant target in its efforts to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. The administration announced that emissions of harmful substances had been reduced in the Mexican capital by 5.7 million metric tons since the government implemented its Plan de Acción Climática de la Ciudad de México in 2008. This is about 82% of the goal of reducing greenhouse gasses by 7 million MT during the administration's tenure in office.

"During the past four years, we have made significant progress toward becoming one of the world's most sustainable cities by promoting environmental stewardship not only in our government operations but also by encouraging widespread business and citizen participation," Ebrard told reporters.

Ebrard might not stay in office long enough to meet the goal, since the Mexico City mayor has hinted that he will seek the nomination of the center-left coalition led by the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) in the 2012 presidential election. If he does, he will have to leave his current post early. There is precedent for this move, as both Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the PRD resigned as Mexico City mayor to seek the party's presidential nomination ([SourceMex, April 21, 1999](#)) and ([Aug. 3, 2005](#)).

But Ebrard is confident that the environmental efforts that he started will continue under his successor. "Mexico City is one of the few municipalities around the world that has set such an ambitious agenda, not just to be followed during the course of the current administration but also for succeeding mayors to follow," said Ebrard.

The Mexico City environmental plan, considered the most comprehensive in the world, includes initiatives dealing with transportation, energy and water conservation, solid-waste management, air quality, reforestation, and climate adaptation.

The plan put a lot of effort into reforming the transport sector, which accounts for 44% of total output of greenhouse gasses in the capital. Under Ebrard, Mexico City greatly expanded the bus rapid-transit (BRT) system, known as the Metrobús, to three lines and constructed Line 12 of the subway. With the inauguration of the Metrobús Line 3 in February, the system now has 280 high-capacity, low-emission buses.

"With this new BRT line, we expect to cut up to 100,000 car trips per day," Metrobús Director Guillermo Calderón said at a press conference to launch Line 3.

As part of its campaign to clean the air in the capital, the administration also replaced 80,000 taxis and 4,000 minibuses with units that produce less pollution, developed Zero Emissions corridors, and developed the Ecobici bicycle-sharing network.

"Mexico City also ranks first in the country in reforestation and prevention of forest fires," said Ebrard's environment secretary Martha Delgado.

Mexico City has implemented other major energy-saving initiatives under Ebrard, including increased efficiency in public-street and Metro lighting and installing energy-saving units in the escalators at subway stations. The administration has also fostered programs to save water in public buildings and expanded the recycling system.

Ebrard's efforts have gone beyond Mexico City. As chair of the World Mayors Council on Climate, he hosted mayors from around the world last November to sign the Mexico City Pact, a voluntary agreement among cities to cooperate and report their climate efforts ([SourceMex, Nov. 17, 2010](#)). As of May 11, a total of 191 municipalities had signed the agreement. The list includes several major cities like Buenos Aires, La Paz, Rio de Janeiro, Vancouver (Canada), Paris, Lisbon, Johannesburg, Istanbul, Los Angeles, and Melbourne (Australia). But the majority of communities on the list are small and medium-sized municipalities.

Race begins to succeed Ebrard

Ebrard's strong environmental-protection record will be a hard act to follow for his successor, who will be elected on July 1, 2012, the same day as Mexico's presidential election. Five successive members of the PRD, including interim mayors Rosario Robles and Alejandro Encinas, have governed the capital since the current system of direct elections began in 1997. While the three major political parties have yet to designate a candidate for the election, the maneuvering has already begun.

The only declared candidate thus far is PRD Sen. Carlos Navarrete, the floor leader of the center-left party in the upper house. No clear candidates have emerged thus far from the two other major parties, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN).

Navarrete announced his candidacy with much fanfare in late May, surrounded by musicians, actors, and other politicians. "I have begun an effort to gauge the pulse of the city and come into contact with its citizens," said Navarrete, who hoped the early entry would give him an advantage over other potential rivals from his party.

Despite Navarrete's early jump into the race, party officials are not conceding the nomination to the Senate leader. Speaking to reporters in early August, PRD president Jesús Zambrano said there is no guarantee that Navarrete will represent the PRD in the 2012 election. "We want to ensure a level playing field," said the PRD president.

Navarrete, Zambrano, and Ebrard have been associated with the Nueva Izquierda faction of the PRD, and there is an effort to avoid the appearance that that wing of the party, known as Los Chuchos after Zambrano and former PRD leader Jesús Ortega, is seeking to muscle out factions that support López Obrador.

"It was not long ago that the question would have been which member of the PRD is going to govern Mexico City, the Los Chuchos faction or some candidate associated with López Obrador and the network created by his supporter René Bejarano," newspaper said in a political blog.

But observers point out there is no guarantee that a PRD member is going to succeed Ebrard, especially if predictions prove true that the PRI and its candidate Enrique Peña Nieto are going to win the presidential elections by a wide margin. Peña Nieto's coattails could boost a PRI candidate in Mexico City, especially if the party's representative has strong name recognition.

Some political observers suggest that Ebrard doesn't have the political strength to influence the elections despite his strong performance in office. "Ebrard does not have a bad image, but he has yet to demonstrate the same pull that López Obrador had at the end of his term," said the blog. "In 2005, López Obrador had an 80% approval rating among Mexico City residents. Today, Ebrard only enjoys a 50% approval rate."

"Marcelo Ebrard has governed the capital reasonably well, and perhaps he has more accomplishments than Cárdenas or López Obrador," wrote columnist Federico Berrueto in Milenio.com. "But his policies have been more appealing to the citizens who support the PAN than to the popular classes."

A recent poll by the Mexico City daily gauged the public sentiment a year before the election. The poll initially did not name any candidates, but asked would-be voters about their party preference in the mayoral election. About 37% of respondents said they would vote for the PRI, 30% for the PRD, and 14% for the PAN. "The results of the Reforma poll change the coordinates considerably," said the blog. "The question now is whether the PRD is capable of retaining the capital."

But Reforma also conducted its survey with hypothetical candidates and found that the PRI could win big if former party president Beatriz Paredes Rangel is the party's candidate. Paredes Rangel, who came in third to Ebrard in the 2006 election, served as governor of Tlaxcala between 1978 and 1980. She received 52% support from respondents to the poll, almost double the support for three potential PRD rivals: Navarrete, Mexico City finance director Mario Delgado, and Ebrard's social-development secretary Martí Batres. This assumes that the center-left coalition would enter the election as a united entity rather than having various factions running a candidate.

Berrueto said Delgado is a close confidant of Ebrard and would certainly count on the support from his boss. "But Mexico City prosecutor Miguel Angel Mancera would be a better candidate," said the Milenio.com columnist. "Alejandra Barrales would be a good second option."

The PAN has pockets of support in Mexico City but not enough to make a difference. The hypothetical candidate for the center-right party, Demetrio Sodi, received 21% of support from respondents to the poll, eight percentage points behind Navarrete, who had 29% support. Sodi came in a distant second to Ebrard in the 2006 election with 20% of the vote.

PAN officials said the party would start its selection process for the 2012 race in October and expects to name a candidate by mid-March at the latest.

"The PAN has no choice but to hold a direct election that would allow the party to rally its supporters and give legitimacy to its eventual candidate," said Berrueto. "A weak candidate in both the presidential and Mexico City elections would doom the party to third place in both races."

Berrueto said a potentially attractive PAN candidate would be federal Deputy Gabriela Cuevas. "There could be three women seeking the nomination from their party: Beatriz Paredes, Alejandra Barrales, and Gabriela Cuevas," said the Milenio.com columnist.

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