

Latino Leaders Network  
42<sup>nd</sup> Tribute to Mayors  
Antonio Villaraigosa Leadership Award  
Mayor Kirk Watson Remarks

June 20, 2025

I am truly and deeply honored to receive this award. I have deep respect for the Latino Leaders Network. I've known Mickey Ibarra for over a quarter of a century now and I must admit I'm especially honored and moved to receive a recognition named after Mayor Villaraigosa.

You mean a great deal to all of us. Thank you. So *muchas gracias* and thank you very much for this wonderful honor. Let me say a few words about why it means so much to me to be among mayors and receive an award that honors mayors.

I was recently asked to write a think piece, if you will, about local government for a new textbook on Texas politics. Yeah and I'm just goofy and I'm just goofy enough to think that's kind of fun, right?

As I was putting my thoughts together I kept coming back to a great quote about the founding father John Adams. Adams received a compliment from a British spy and the British spy said about Adams said: "He sees large issues largely". If he had aspired to such heights John Adams would have made a good mayor.

Cities face so many large issues today seemingly all at the same time under a white-hot spotlight so much so that it's easy to lose perspective if you're not seeing largely. Right or wrong people view the mayor's office as the one reliable institution that recognizes their real everyday challenges for what they are and can deliver solutions scaled to address them. From the Mayor's office, they expect results. Mayors really need to see large issues largely.

Many of you know, and as you just heard, this is my second time around as Austin Mayor. As was pointed out, I served as Mayor from 1997 to 2001. By the way, that's when I first met Mickey. I got to tell you, he was so good to me when he was in the White House, and he was so good at helping local government. He understood the challenges, and he was always, no matter what the phone call and no matter how weird he might have thought it was, he was always ready to jump in and help.

After I served quite a long time in the Texas Senate and then a very short time in academia, I wanted to come back to Austin City Hall because I felt so strongly about the role the mayor's office plays in how we live day to day and what the future of that living is going to look like.

Getting good things done at the local level, as has been suggested time and time again, tonight is more important than ever. The difficult truth is that we live in a time when extreme

divisions seem to have transformed too many American institutions into forums for delivering insults rather than delivering results. When many in Congress and in our state legislatures are so transparently intent on building power just to impose their political point of view.

Instead, they could be, but instead they don't use it to actually get anything done. It's no surprise that voters want their local government and especially their city government to really solve problems, to truly make life in our communities better.

Last weekend was a stunning example. Many of you were on the front lines of how government is meant to work. I was so proud of how so many cities allowed for, indeed helped, enhanced, and embraced peaceful protests. Washington can create chaos. State leadership can engage in confrontational rhetoric and threats. But it falls on mayors and our cities to protect our people, protect their rights so that they can assemble, so they can speak their minds.

It falls on us to assure traffic is controlled. It's the local government that needs to be sometimes in unfortunate instances there to protect property and when it's all over we clean up the remnants and put our cities the places our people call home back in order.

Last week we saw an example of how local leadership can lift up the better parts of our democracy in the midst of some of the worst demeaning of our democracy. Local government is where we see large issues largely and we act and as I used the example of last week.

Let's not lose sight. Let's not lose sight that all of that is in the context that we live in a nation that must still acknowledge a heartbreaking stained history of racism and how we treat Latinos and people of color.

Unfortunately, it's foundational to the creation of our country and perhaps more unfortunately some want to revisit it, reinforce it and further it today. Now while everyone knows I'm talking about the current attacks on Latinos as part of the immigration efforts and it's been mentioned already tonight.

Mayors also still see other evils of inequality today. We see it in the news. We see it in health care, in homelessness, in education and in economic reports and Mayors, we see it with our own eyes. Again, we need to see large issues largely and lead because just as a person's values can change for the better So can a nation's. Thank God.

But it does require accountable leadership If we're going to overcome so many of our current challenges Including those rooted in racism and inequality, I believe it will be because of our cities and our mayors being out front.

At the local level we fix the common problems all of us see every day. We hear directly from our neighbors about their aspirations as well as their expectations of us. We respond when they most need help. As Mayors, we ask ourselves every day, are the things we're doing going to make a real difference for real people in the real world, and are we doing them well and getting the outcomes the people expect and deserve?

Local government respects and demands what I like to call practical idealism, an approach of addressing challenges that's value-based and it connects us with our neighbors. It's an approach that manifests the optimism we share, and practical idealism pours our creative energy into the things that need to get done. It's where the policy meets the pavement, it's where the basics of everyday living and the fundamentals of how so many people living near each other actually gets done. It's also about how those things get done. what gets done, and for whom, every day, all day.

In case you can't tell it, I love being mayor. And I appreciate all of you who are mayors, and all of you who are supporting and helping mayors. Thank you for that.

Again, I want to say thank you to the Latino Leaders Network for recognizing me, but more importantly, Mickey, for your support of mayors, for lifting up practical idealism, and

for helping all of us think largely. God bless you and thank you very much.