Just in case you were worried that there won't be enough political advertising over the next few months, the Los Angeles City Council last week gave you a gift - a request to voters to retain a telephone users' tax.

Los Angeles officials now are quietly gearing up for an ad campaign in support of the measure on the Feb. 5 presidential primary ballot.

If it goes as planned, Angelenos may be seeing more police officers, firefighters and librarians on television than we would ever get a chance to see in real life.

And if city backers of the measure are lucky, those will be the only voices voters end up hearing.

So far, two principal telephone companies - which have sued the city to end the tax on cell-phone customers - say they have no plans to campaign against the measure. And their local representatives are urging they stay out of the fight.

"It's a zero-sum gain," said one adviser, who asked not to be identified. "They still have to do business with the city. Basically they are just tax collectors for the city. If people oppose it or support it, it really doesn't affect their business."

So far, the unions representing police and firefighters have yet to decide what they will do, but they realize the impact if the tax - which brings in $270 million a year - fails.

"We don't have much as a department that we can cut," said Steve Tufts of United Firefighters of Los Angeles City.

"That $270 million is about half our budget. We wouldn't have to cut that amount, but any cut hurts our service to the public. We are already understaffed."

For Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and the City Council, the phone tax issue couldn't come at a worse time.

With an angry electorate concerned about its own financial well-being, city officials must win over a majority of voters to support the tax while also pushing through rate increases for both water and power.

The Board of Water and Power Commissioners has recommended a 6 percent increase over two years in water rates, and 9 percent over three years for electricity.

But both have to go through City Council committees and the full City Council.
Villaraigosa and his aides will be making a pitch to Neighborhood Councils to get on board this Saturday - or at the least remain neutral - when they hold their annual Congress of Neighborhoods at the Convention Center.

The mayor outlined the depth of the problem last week at a special meeting of Neighborhood Councils - where he received a cool reception.

But Villaraigosa is still hoping to enlist Neighborhood Council leaders to be a vanguard of the campaign and he is trying to highlight the problems with an interactive program to be up soon on the city's Web site.

Councilman Tom LaBonge, given the title of "Mayor of Griffith Park" after the fires there earlier this year, is being honored by People for Parks this week at its sixth-annual awards dinner.

The group also is honoring environmental attorney Carlyle Hall Jr. and the group Community Unity Reaching Everyone for its support of public parks.

The event is being held at the Los Angeles River Center tonight. Officials have adopted a $2 billion master plan to reclaim the 32-mile river.

Dr. Bill Burke received an early Christmas gift from the California Legislature.

Burke, facing term limits from his position as chair of the South Coast Air Quality Management District, was able to effectively get around the limit because of a bill by state Sen. Gloria Negrette McLeod, D-San Bernardino, according to the Capitol Weekly.

The McLeod bill included adding another member to the board to give smaller cities a greater voice.

Two earlier bills to lift term limits for Burke - who is the husband of Los Angeles County Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke - failed after news reports of his efforts to get around the term limits.

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