

SAN FERNANDO VALLEY



Councilwoman Wendy Greuel's latest mission began after her car was stalled at Moorpark Street and Vineland Avenue.

Gus Ruelas/Staff Photographer

Greuel: street savvy

Councilwoman searching for answers to traffic woes

By Lisa Mascaro
Staff Writer

The pothole queen is taking on traffic.

City Councilwoman Wendy Greuel, who has won kudos for getting basic municipal services to her San Fernando Valley district, is turning her sights on the daunting challenge of fixing traffic in Los Angeles.

She took the helm of the council's Transportation Committee last week and plans to use the post to promote a gridlock-relieving agenda: from improving city streets to getting more money for congestion-busting projects.

"In Los Angeles right now, it's traffic, traffic, traffic," said the 44-year-old councilwoman. "That's what everyone is talking about. It impacts our daily life. I'd be much more happy reading books to my child than reading bumper stickers every day.

"We're really saying, it's a new day, a new day in the issue of transportation.

"We haven't had very good messengers in the past, if at all, who've said traffic is a priority," she said. "We're interested in elevating the discussion."

Her goals dovetail with those of Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who has made transportation a cornerstone of his agenda since taking office July 1.

The two unveiled tandem

plans last week to halt street construction during rush hour on major roads.

With the mayor at the helm of the countywide Metropolitan Transportation Authority board and Greuel heading up the city Transportation Committee, some see a spotlight on the No. 1 issue Angelenos love to hate.

"Wendy Greuel brings to the table great skills," said veteran political consultant Kam Kuwata, who ran former Mayor James Hahn's campaign. "No one will work harder than Wendy Greuel.

"She's certainly smart. She certainly has the ability to unify diverse groups. Certainly the mayor has that talent. The expectation level, because the two of them are in place, is extraordinarily high.

"But the challenge is monumental," he said. "It will take all the kinds of skills Wendy and Antonio will bring to the challenge. How do you solve these problems without massive amounts of spending? I'm not saying it is an unsolvable challenge. But it certainly is the challenge."

But those who've watched Greuel know she loves a challenge.

She was an executive with DreamWorks when she catapulted onto the political scene as the underdog candidate in the 2001 special election,

coming from behind to beat former Assemblyman and now fellow Councilman Tony Cardenas.

She quickly made a name for herself as a roll-up-her-sleeves kind of representative who got potholes filled and park restrooms cleaned in her 2nd District, which stretches from Sunland-Tujunga to Studio City.

By the time she was up for re-election in 2003, she had no opponents.

Greuel has since utilized her savvy potholes politics to tackle thorny issues like business tax reform, which she successfully ushered through the council last year.

This summer, she was named to the Transportation Committee.

"This committee is going to be one of action," she said.

Already, in addition to the rush-hour construction ban, the councilwoman has introduced motions to secure state transportation funds and ensure that \$4.5 billion in federally funded projects recently awarded from Washington are built.

Plus she has a lengthy list of topics she hopes to tackle, including plans to:

- Fully implement the remainder of the street signal synchronization system, which traffic engineers say could cut congestion by 15 percent.
- Create incentives for

flexible work schedules to cut down on rush-hour traffic.

- Coordinate the city's Transportation, Planning and Housing departments to integrate traffic plans and encourage development near transit.

- Secure more funds through Washington, D.C., and Sacramento, and consider taking out bonds to accelerate some transportation projects.

"The thing about Wendy is, she sees a problem, she tackles it, she doesn't run away from it," said David Fleming, the Valley civic leader and former commissioner of the California Department of Transportation who's now a Villaraigosa appointee to the MTA board.

"She's sharp. She understands what's going on. She gets things done."

Fleming, who regularly talks with the councilwoman on common issues, plans to work with her on transportation issues.

"Her position is, we can make small, incremental changes that can have enormous effect," he said. "That's what we're going to be working on."

Greuel says she'll still be the pothole queen, but also wants to try to fix traffic by having a committee that's more than just a "pass-through. This is where ideas come up."