Olympic flag arrival kicks off 2028 ‘pressure’ for Los Angeles

AFP- The Olympic flag arrived under bright skies Monday in Los Angeles, where officials now have four short years to organize a Games capable of rivaling the widely praised Paris edition in a notoriously traffic-clogged metropolis.

Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass landed in a plane emblazoned with palm trees and the logo “LA 2028,” and crossed the tarmac holding the five-ringed banner, accompanied by several US athletes.

“We feel the pressure to make sure that our city and our region is prepared and ready,” she told reporters.

“We have the flag now. It’s on us. We got a lot of work to do Los Angeles,” Bass added.

A timely reminder of potential unique challenges came moments before her plane landed, as a 4.6-magnitude earthquake shook Los Angeles.

“Making sure that we are prepared for events like an earthquake” will be key to infrastructure plans, she said. “But also now we have climate events that we never thought about impacting our region, that we have to be prepared for as well.”

Still, the biggest challenge will inevitably be transport.

In Paris for the closing ceremony last weekend, Bass outlined plans for Los Angeles to deliver a “no-car Games.”

In a city addicted to private vehicles, where gigantic freeways criss-cross the urban sprawl and traffic jams are a

daily inevitability, that pledge is ambitious.

“I’m skeptical we’ll actually achieve that, but I know we’re going to try,” said James Moore, an industrial and systems engineering professor at University of Southern California.

– ‘Out of town’ –

Los Angeles does have a subway network, but at just five-and-a-half lines and relatively infrequent service, it is tiny for the region’s 10 million residents.

Authorities plan to bring in 3,000 buses, borrowed from all over the country, and to create dedicated road lanes for them.

Public transport will receive priority over private cars, which will not be banned.

Not all Olympic sites are expected to have parking.

The last time Los Angeles hosted the Olympics, in 1984, many residents left the city, averting a traffic nightmare.

“If we see residents following the same strategy in 2028 and basically getting out of town for a few days, that may free up enough road space that we’re able to move everybody with buses,” said Moore.

The city’s giant main airport, infamous for its accessibility issues, will – at least – finally be connected to the metro train network.

An automated shuttle, long in the works, is due to open by 2026, when Los Angeles will host the opening match of the soccer World Cup.

– Hollywood, homelessness –

Los Angeles is counting heavily on its reputation as the world’s movies and entertainment capital.

In a “handover” segment of the Paris closing ceremony, Tom Cruise parachuted with the Olympic flag into Los Angeles near the famous Hollywood sign, which he then redecorated with the Olympic logo.

Los Angeles is also a US sporting powerhouse, with numerous major teams and state-of-the-art stadiums.

“What’s not in our DNA? We’re creative, we’re storytellers. We’ve got sport, we’ve got diversity. It’s LA,” Reynold Hoover, CEO of the 2028 organizing committee, told AFP.

But beneath the Hollywood glitz, Los Angeles has an enormous homelessness crisis. Some 75,000 people lack housing, in a city where real estate is eye-wateringly expensive.

Since arriving at City Hall, Bass has made this long standing issue a priority. A vast shelter program has recently shown signs of progress.

The total number of homeless people fell slightly in 2024, for the first time in six years.

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