

THE REAL DEAL

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NEW YORK REAL ESTATE NEWS

Vol.7 No.7 July 2009 \$3.00

July 2009

PROFILE

A behind-the-scenes player

Lobbyist Suri Kasirer pushes projects for the biggest names in real estate

By GABBY WARSHAWER

Kasirer Consulting's client list reads like a who's who of local real estate luminaries. The Manhattan-based lobbying firm's clients include SL Green Realty, Manhattan's largest commercial landlord; the developers of the New Domino, the biggest mixed-use project planned in Williamsburg; Elad Properties, the Israeli company that converted the Plaza Hotel into one of the most expensive condominiums ever, and a host of others.

Public records show that Kasirer Consulting took in more than \$3 million in

of the façade for the Museum of Arts and Design at 2 Columbus Circle and Extell Development's planned Diamond Tower on West 47th Street, in addition to the New Domino project and the Plaza Hotel conversion.

She also has deep political roots. Up until last year, she was a longtime fundraiser for Bill Thompson, the city comptroller and a mayoral candidate, and during the presidential campaign she was hired by Hillary Clinton as a fundraiser, according to published reports. However, she has stated publicly that her firm is now more focused on

reality is, nobody is going to support your project as a favor to you. These things are too complicated, and there's too much at stake. You need to make your case, and you need to help your client make their case."

Be that as it may, some of Kasirer's clients have not been portrayed in the most flattering light by politicians and non-profits.

For example, Kasirer counts as clients Vantage Properties and Apollo Real Estate Advisors (which has been renamed AREA Property Partners), two firms that have been depicted in articles and by elected of-

and approvals. And having a well-connected (not to mention well-paid) lobbyist can be a powerful tool to get a lucrative project off the ground.

"It is important to have the right lobbyist for a rezoning," says David Von Spreckelsen, an executive vice president for Toll Brothers.

Von Spreckelsen, who has not used Kasirer Consulting, says the lobbying firm he has used for a rezoning effort in Gowanus was "invaluable for their government and

Real estate attorney Luigi Rosabianca,



Suri Kasirer is one of the most powerful lobbyists in the city, with a client list that includes some of the biggest players in real estate.

fees in 2006, making it the highest-earning lobbying firm in New York for that year, the last year for which the city has released rankings. Last year, the firm's clients — which have included Cemusa, the Spanish firm that won a \$1.3 billion contract to build the new bus shelters that now dot the city — spent more than \$4.5 million in lobbying. And now, as the real estate industry tries to reposition itself to catch the next upturn, lobbying for zoning changes, tax benefits, and contracts in connection with long-term development projects (see "Anticipating the rebound" in the June issue) may be more important than ever.

Suri Kasirer, who founded the company that bears her name in 1997, says real estate interests comprise only about a third of her firm's client base — nonprofit groups and corporate clients split the rest.

However, during an interview in her office, which is just blocks away from City Hall, she points out that, "some of our not-for-profit and some of our corporate [clients] are involved with real estate [projects]. So, in many cases, real estate crosses those lines."

In fact, Kasirer has worked on some of the highest-profile projects in the city, including the planned revamp of the South Street Seaport, the controversial redesign

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lobbying than on raising money for political candidates.

Kasirer, who is married to Bruce Teitelbaum, Rudy Giuliani's former chief of staff, describes her work on behalf of development projects as "government relations" rather than lobbying.

"The way I sort of think of someone in government relations with regard to a development project is really kind of as an adviser, as a strategist; someone to help build consensus by third parties, by local communities; someone who has experience negotiating with local communities and understands what it is that they need in order to help them support a project," she told *The Real Deal*.

In addition, she disputes the stereotypical perception of lobbyists.

"I think lobbyists get a bad rap and some of the perception of what lobbyists do is that they're sitting in a smoke-filled back hall making a deal giving some kind of quid pro quo for the special interests," she says. "The

officials as affordable-housing predators. In a Village Voice article from a year ago, a representative for Vantage — which, with the backing of Apollo, purchased more than 9,000 rent-regulated units in Manhattan and Queens between 2006 and 2008 — said the company had hired Kasirer Consulting to clear up misconceptions about the company's business practices.

"We've been helpful in getting elected officials to tour their sites and hear Vantage's side of the story," says Kasirer, adding that she believes the company utilizes "best practices" and should be "a model for other developers."

She continues: "Some of the people responsible [for the bad press] are tenant instigators who are trying to create an issue for their own gain, and they irresponsibly go to elected officials with misinformation."

Whatever their reputations, most developers rely heavily on lobbyists to clear hurdles when it comes to zoning changes

partner at the firm Rosabianca & Associates, says "any time a private firm wants to build on public land, you're going to need lobbying" to navigate government channels.

Kasirer does not back away from fights. In addition to drumming up community support and dealing with Bloomberg administration officials, her firm is also hired to negotiate with groups — often preservationists — who are opposed to particular developments.

For example, she says when she was lobbying on behalf of the redesign of the façade of 2 Columbus Circle for the Museum of Arts and Design, her client's plan for the building was heavily opposed by two not-for-profit groups, Landmarks West and the Historic Districts Council.

Opponents were against the façade change on the grounds that 2 Columbus — also known as "The Lollipop Building" — was a late modernist landmark that

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should be designated and preserved as such by the city.

"We got the support of the community board and the local community, but we had two not-for-profits that were against us changing the façade of the building," Kasirer says. "We worked very hard to send the message that despite the fact that there were two groups against us, it didn't mean everyone was against us."

"Often times folks in government, folks in elected positions, only hear from one group of people and they think, 'They're against the project. So it's your responsibility, if you have a development project, to find the people who support you and activate them.'"

Kate Wood, the executive director of preservationist group Landmarks West, disputes Kasirer's assertion that her organization was one of only two groups that opposed 2

Columbus's alteration. "At the city, state and international level there were literally hundreds of nonprofits, scholars and laypersons who spoke out against that project," says Wood. She adds: "Lobbying from the real estate industry by people like Suri Kasirer... and other hired guns were a major factor in securing that political victory that outweighed the public sentiment on the project."

In fact, the Municipal Art Society, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, the Preservation League of New York State and the World Monuments Fund were among the many groups that wanted the building landmarked.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission decided against holding a public hearing on 2 Columbus, and in 2005 the DOB approved a façade change for the building

that was completed late last year.

As the 2 Columbus case underscores, Kasirer's lobbying work means she is often involved in high-profile projects that drive to the heart of some very public debates.

Kasirer says she does not take on clients whose work she does not believe in, and that she ultimately sees her role as a form of "advocacy" on behalf of organizations, companies or developers whose mission or projects she thinks will have a positive effect on communities and, often, the city as a whole.

"Often times there are community needs that are very real, and those need to be balanced with development. And a community might agree to a major development project if they feel the community will get other things that they need in return for that," Kasirer says. "That's a process and a discussion." **mb**