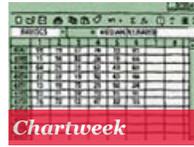




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## Power Broker

# Suri Kasirer, the Lobbyist Behind Cornell's Roosevelt Island Win

By Daniel Edward Rosen 6/05/12 10:00am

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It was near the end of 2011, and what most New Yorkers knew of the city's plan to create an ambitious tech campus on Roosevelt Island was that Stanford University had the project in the bag.

For Suri Kasirer, the founder and president of Kasirer Consulting, the notion could not have been farther from the truth. Indeed, the New York native had been working behind the scenes for months on behalf of her darkhorse client, Cornell University, to whittle down the number of candidates vying to oversee the project, and it was all finally beginning to pay off.

"We're in a service business, so we do whatever we have to do to make sure that our clients can achieve their goals ... within a framework of ethics and principle," said Ms. Kasirer, whose offices are decorated with photographs of herself next to a litany of the country's most powerful public figures, Bill and Hillary Clinton as well as Bette Midler not least among them.

"Sometimes it means doing the dirty work."



Suri Kasirer.

Even before her involvement with Cornell University, the institution now charged with overseeing what many see as Mayor Michael Bloomberg's crowning civic achievement, Ms. Kasirer learned about dirty work during her tenure as advisor to then-Governor Mario Cuomo and as an advocate for nonprofits.

Ms. Kasirer, who is rapidly becoming the real estate industry's top choice for complicated deals, cut her teeth with the Museum of Arts and Design, whose officials had set their sights on 2 Columbus Circle as the museum's next home after the city put the Edward Durell Stone-designed building back on the market in March 2000.

After the museum submitted its request for proposal, controversy arose almost instantly, not to mention lawsuits by the Historic Districts Council and Landmarks West.

"Their beef was that they wanted a landmarks hearing on the building—it was the old [A&P heir] Huntington Hartford building, and they very much wanted it to be landmarked," she said.

Ms. Kasirer and her client eventually prevailed—moving into the so-called “Lollipop Building” in September 2008—and she remembers fondly the scrappiness needed to see the victory through.

“I have to say that I was just there last week and every time I walk in the building, it’s such a sense of pride,” she said. “[This is] what it takes to do a real project in New York.”

Ms. Kasirer and company would go on to fight tougher battles for even bigger real estate projects: She represented Elad Properties, owners of the Plaza Hotel, in their quest to convince the Mayor’s Office, the City Council and the Landmarks Preservation Committee (along with the hotel workers’ union) to allow them to convert the property into a mix of condos, hotel rooms and retail. Elad eventually got their wish. Ms. Kasirer has also represented SL Green and the Howard Hughes Corporation in their development projects.

But perhaps her most notable victory is her most recent: helping Cornell University win a tech campus on Roosevelt Island.

For a while there, though, it looked as if the prize—in the shape of a 10-acre campus worth \$2 billion—was a certain California school’s to lose.

“Everybody thought Stanford was going to win,” Ms. Kasirer agreed.

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To many observers, Stanford, with its proximity to Silicon Alley and its illustrious academic standing, would have been the perfect institution to associate with Mayor Bloomberg’s ambition to create an incubator for new tech start-ups on Roosevelt Island.

Eager to see the tech campus awarded to a local school, Cornell hired Kasirer Consulting to lobby government leaders, local business groups, and just about everyone and anyone to keep the school as a frontrunner in the tech campus’ RFP process.

She and her team met with elected officials and community leaders both in Queens and Roosevelt Island. She met City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, New York City Public Advocate Bill de Blasio and members of the Association for a Better New York. In short, just about anyone she could get a meeting with. “Wherever we went, we were there first,” she emphasized.

While a total of seven universities had entered their bids for the school, Ms. Kasirer was intent on making the bidding war a two-horse race.

“I think one of the first things you want to do is convince people that you have a shot, because I think the perception was so weighted that Stanford was going to win this,” she said.

Bolstering her campaign to push Cornell to the fore was Sandy Weill, the billionaire Cornell alum who was among a handful of what Ms. Kasirer described as secret weapons—people with existing relationships with elected officials.

“He was really, really committed to making this happen,” she said.

In December, Stanford announced it would be withdrawing its bid (officials reportedly bickered over a timetable for construction). Cornell, in a partnership with Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, won the campus.

It was the type of project—and victory—that her firm savors: complex, large-scale development requiring a good deal of interagency work, and a lot of community and government communication.

Similar projects include her work with Madison Square Garden, where she is now lobbying for the renewal of a 50-year special permit that is set to expire in 2013. The legendary arena is about to embark on its next phase of renovation, and Ms. Kasirer is currently petitioning for the

permit's renewal under the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure.

"It's one of the only arenas in the country that has a private transformation like that," she said.

Her firm also successfully helped CPC Resources with its \$1.4 billion proposal to rezone and transform the Domino Sugar factory site into a mixed-use development—"a really exciting project," she said.

She worked with Gary Barnett's Extell Development to help develop the International Gem Tower, a diamond center located in the middle of Manhattan's Diamond district that will be the first of its kind.

"We wanted New York to be competitive with Dubai and Tel Aviv and South Africa and other places in the world that had Class A diamond buildings," Ms. Kasirer said. "Our argument was that's why we were losing a lot of business to those parts of the world." It was a good argument: Extell received a tax incentive package worth nearly \$50 million.

We wondered to ourselves how Ms. Kasirer ever has time for dropping her three children off at school or posing for pictures with politicians. Or even traveling to Las Vegas, which she just returned from to visit MGM, her client, to discuss its plans for a casino, shopping mall and convention center complex in seven proposed sites throughout New York State.

"The governor's talked about seven sites, so it's unclear where around the state this will end up being," Ms. Kasirer said. "I think the model that MGM has will work much better closer to Manhattan."

In the meantime, the Queens native and daughter of an Orthodox rabbi, said she enjoys collecting California Cabernets for her ever-expanding wine cellar. But her proudest accomplishments, outside of her family, are the city buildings she fights tirelessly for.

"I go into the Plaza Hotel, and having been a part of that is amazing," Ms. Kasirer said. "I love everything about living here in New York."

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