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Public And Private Sector Experience In The Christie Era

The Editor interviews Jerold L. Zaro, former Chief of the New Jersey Office of Economic Growth, who focuses his practice on Corporate, Banking and Finance, Real Estate and Government Relations with Sills Cummis & Gross P.C. He is resident in their Newark, NJ and New York City offices.

Editor: Jerry, now that some time has passed since our last interview, how are you enjoying your new firm?

Zaro: I'm having a terrific time. Aristotle said that happiness is the full use of your powers along the lines of excellence in a life affording scope. And being with Sills affords me happiness under the definition. It is among the top law firms in the region, certainly in the very top in New Jersey. It has assembled an incredible array of talent. This gives me the confidence to reach out to clients, friends and associates whose companies are large regional operations looking for the best legal talent in the region.

It's great at my age and stage in my life to wake up in the morning with the adrenaline flowing, excited to go to work. We all want to have meaning in our lives, and being at Sills has provided that meaning.

Editor: Was it difficult transitioning back to the private sector?

Zaro: Not at all. I am also involved in horse racing. Often, when a horse is "stale" we give it time off from racing. They typically return from that "freshening" recharged and rejuvenated. That's how I feel after my "freshening."

Editor: What do you miss about being in the public sector?



Jerold L. Zaro

Zaro: I point to two things. In the public sector if you're hardworking, have good ideas and provide some measure of leadership, you can really get a lot done to improve the lives of many people. Secondly, I had the opportunity to work with governors with differing leadership styles. My government service was divided in two parts, one under the Corzine administration and one under the Christie administration. I am extremely impressed with the reinvention of government that is the hallmark of the Christie administration. You can't help but believe the national attention the governor is getting is well deserved.

So I do miss the opportunity to be a part of that excitement. I don't think it's an overstatement to say that Governor Christie has changed the way government functions on a state level. And governors from all over the country are emulating what he is doing in New Jersey. He is a year ahead of all of them.

You can't help but regret missing the opportunity of being part of such a groundbreaking administration.

Editor: Has your time in the public sector made you a better lawyer?

Zaro: Absolutely. There is no doubt about that. I don't think you can really understand how to work with our state government unless you have lived there and been part of an administration. In that way you get to know how it works, how decisions are made, and when there is a problem with the state, how to try to correct it. That advantage not only makes me more effective but more cost efficient for the client. If you don't know what to do, you can spend hours and hours going in circles or down dead ends. We don't always get the result the client wants, but we can certainly find out quickly whether it is worthwhile to make the effort.

Editor: In your interview eight months ago and just after the Christie administration started to gain traction, you predicted that other jurisdictions around the country would be copying the Christie model.

Zaro: People are intelligent. They know when something is wrong, and they know when somebody is speaking to them plainly and honestly. That is what they heard from our governor. His ability to communicate the problems we face and then to show results in fixing those problems is what has captured the imagination of the whole country. In a new Quinnipiac poll registered voters throughout the country gave him the highest favorable marks of any current

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politician. What's resonating around the country is his plain-spoken honesty about the mess we are in and what must be done to get out of it.

Editor: Now that you are back in the private sector, what are some of the most rewarding aspects of your practice?

Zaro: One is filling the need for the private sector to work with state government to speed the recovery. We've been involved in doing just that. Good examples are the resurrection of the Xanadu project and keeping Panasonic in New Jersey with its nearly 1,000 jobs and international reputation. Another great experience has been the opportunity to participate with a three member team of the firm's most brilliant lawyers to discuss an appellate matter, led by former Supreme Court Justice Peter Verniero. And involvement with our real estate department on urgent matters is always impressive. I met yesterday with four of our top lawyers working around the clock to bring a major real estate deal to fruition in 48 hours. These are just a few examples of why at 60 I feel more energized than ever before in my lifetime.

Editor: Tell us more about the Xanadu project.

Zaro: It involves the construction of a large complex occupying over two million square feet of entertainment and retail space located just outside Giants Stadium in the New Jersey Meadowlands, which had failed under its first two developers. We were privileged to be a part of the group representing the lending consortium that has taken over the property.

The new developer is not simply going to come in and cover over the much-criticized exterior that exists now, but plans to open it on a much grander and more exciting scale than the original plan, which will create thousands of good New Jersey jobs and many millions of dollars in sales taxes for the state. Instead of becoming a symbol of failure it's going to become an icon for New Jersey's successful turnaround. Again, a lot of the credit goes to Governor

Christie for his support of that project and to Jon Hanson, who heads a committee that works on difficult projects for the governor. Without them this wouldn't have happened.

Editor: You mentioned the role of Jon Hanson. How do you feel about those who work with Governor Christie?

Zaro: You have very few of what I call "lifers" in his cabinet. The governor has recruited the best and brightest to serve in his administration. A good example of the quality of its members are people like Rich Bagger, his chief of staff, who was as one of the most senior executives at Pfizer and one of the leaders of the New Jersey State Senate. He is as good as they get and always stays calm under the most stressful circumstances. The governor is very well served by him, and you know it is a tough job. You can't find a single person to say a bad thing about Rich. And Jeff Chiesa, Bill Stepien, Jim Simpson, Andy Eristoff, Tom Considine, Lori Grifa, Bob Martin ... my gosh, it's like an all-star team.

Editor: What is your biggest challenge?

Zaro: It is keeping all the balls in the air. I know the clients' expectations. There isn't a piece of paper that goes out from any of our attorneys on any matter I bring in that I don't see.

Editor: How has the flurry of federal legislation affected your firm's practice? Take health care for example?

Zaro: Health care is just exploding. We have, I believe, the largest hospital and health care practice in New Jersey measured by the number of hospitals and health care organizations we represent. Not only are our clients faced with a proliferation of regulations that we help them interpret, but many also find themselves faced with investigations and audits. In addition, we help them with a variety of business transactions. This has been a very busy area for us. Gary Herschman, chair of our health and hospital law practice group, has done a phenomenal job. My hospital and health care

clients have been very pleased with our services.

Editor: How have clients received you?

Zaro: My clients have come to me trusting in my judgment to assemble a team of the right people at the firm to handle their matter. The other thing is that when clients come to me, they know that the trains are going to run on time. They are not going to miss a deadline. If they are putting in a bid on a real estate deal, they are not going to lose it because we weren't ready in time. If they come with a matter that I think is weak, we will tell them the truth and say, "Look our job is to leave you in a better position after you have been to us than before. Save the legal fees and live to fight another day."

Editor: On a different note, you are being honored by Sloan Kettering as its 2011 Award of Courage recipient, and Governor Christie is the keynote speaker.

Zaro: For Governor Christie to take time out of his hectic schedule to come into New York where the event is being held is immensely gratifying. Governor Christie's mother passed away from cancer some years ago. He is very sensitive to that and is happy to help us boost attendance and donations to help in the fight against cancer. I had my own battle in 1989 and received treatments. I am very grateful that I am here today. My brother-in-law passed away despite the heroic efforts at Sloan Kettering in June of last year. My nephew had significant surgery at Sloan Kettering. If you want to talk about meaningful services, I can't think of anything more meaningful. To me, it is a privilege to be a part of this.

Editor: We are very privileged to have your interview in our newspaper. I wish you all the best. I know that this will be a marvelous occasion.

Zaro: Well, thank you. I have been impressed by what it is you do. I didn't even recognize myself the first time you published my interview. Thank you for being so gracious.