

## COVERSTORY

# RYAN'S HOPE

The testy chief of ABLI wants a lot less government to lobby

By DAVID WINZELBERG

Everyone has an ax to grind. Desmond Ryan has seven.

When his frustrations mount – and they so often do – the chief of Long Island's foremost pro-development group grabs one of his trusty blades and heads for the backyard of his St. James home to work them off on the woodpile.

These days, the splinters are flying.

As the executive director of the Association for a Better Long Island and one of the area's most influential lobbyists, Ryan is charged with advancing the cause of a small, but well-heeled posse of property owners that collectively controls more than \$15 billion worth of commercial real estate.

Over the years, he's worked behind the scenes to hammer out the Pine Barrens Protection Act, lobbied the Long Island Power Authority to challenge property taxes on its power plants and pushed Nassau County not to repay school districts for certiorari proceedings.

But the recent defeat of a proposed \$110 million apartment complex in Huntington Station, the continuing lack of a comprehensive regional land-use plan and ever-spiraling property taxes have been sending Ryan to the woodshed. Another favored swing: Governmental inaction and largesse.

"Long Island has more government than the Soviet Union," Ryan said.

Ryan knows something of government, having worked in both town and state offices. The son of an Irish immigrant, there's politics in the blood, too. His mother, an organizer for Barry Goldwater in the 1960s, was a descendant of James Michael Curley, former Boston mayor, U.S. congressman and governor of Massachusetts.

A notorious machine politician, Curley was convicted of mail fraud during his fourth term as mayor and spent five months in prison before being pardoned by President Harry Truman.

Though just as passionate, Ryan's political experience has been less colorful and, to date, in much less need of pardons. Starting out in the Smithtown parks department in the 1970s, Ryan became an assistant to then-Suffolk County Executive John Klein, where he learned the intricacies of governing Long Island's "Wild East." A few years later, he joined the staff of state Assembly Speaker Perry Duryea, considered by many the Island's brightest political star.

"Patrick Cunningham was the Bronx Democratic chairman and he told me that the Republicans were the party of opportunity on Long Island," Ryan said. "So that's the direction I took."

Duryea schooled the young Ryan in how Albany worked, providing invaluable prepping for Ryan's later work as a lobbyist for Grumman Corp.

"Duryea was a great teacher and very patient with me," Ryan recalled. "When I got to Grumman, I already knew how things operated."

Proof in point: While working on nondefense issues for Grumman, then the Island's most prolific employer, Ryan helped broker a deal that won the company a \$10 million discount on electrical power in exchange for creating 1,000 new jobs.

On the flip side, Ryan was one of Grumman's chief lobbyists when Pentagon budget cuts signaled the end of the Navy's F-14 Tomcat program. In a March 1989 meeting at the White House, Ryan was able to help negotiate one last round for the \$1.8 billion-a-year contract.

"We came out of that meeting feeling it was a victory," Ryan said. "We might have won the battle, but we lost the war. It was depressing."

With the Cold War in full thaw, in 1990 Ryan took the reins at ABLI, founded a few years earlier by local developers. Although he relishes his current role, Ryan said he regrets not making the move to Washington to continue as a Capitol insider.

"Professionally, I should have," said Ryan, now 59. "But I was building a home here and that kept me from going."

Another big regret for Ryan was the demise of the Shoreham nuclear plant, the Long Island Lighting Co. facility he lobbied for heavily. He called the plant's failure a catastrophic calamity for the Island's present and future economies.

"It was built, it was licensed, it was radiated and it should have gone online at full capacity," he said. Instead, Ryan said the abandoned plant's \$7 billion debt will take decades to pay off, keeping local power rates high.

Besides championing cheaper power and smaller government, Ryan has made the battle for open space one of ABLI's top priorities. He was instrumental in hammering out the 1993 Pine Barrens Protection Act that set clear guidelines for developers, while preserving the native forest and the aquifer below it.

"I walked away from that settlement thinking it was the end of that," Ryan said.

Instead, open space advocates have pushed towns and

counties to spend more than \$1 billion to keep thousands of acres from development and, as a result, off the tax rolls.

"How much more open space do we need?" he asked. "Did you ever look at a map and see how much there already is?"

Ryan has other gripes, including the complaint that former Nassau County Executive Tom Suozzi erred in cutting a deal with Computer Associates founder Charles Wang to redevelop the Nassau Coliseum and its surrounding 77 acres.

"Suozzi sole-sourced the most expensive real estate on Long Island to a software geek who never even built a garage," Ryan said.

His latest tirades have been directed at Vision Long Island, a planning consulting group and "smart growth" proponent, for getting between developers and the communities in which ABLI members are trying to build.

"That organization has cloaked itself as the be all and end all," Ryan said. "They're just getting in the way."

While Ryan rarely holds his fire, he doesn't draw return salvos from most of his targets, which might be the ultimate testament to his clout. Four Long Island power players who've felt his wrath declined to comment on the record for this article.

"I'm just not going to go there," said one.

Richard Amper, executive director of the Pine Barrens Society and, arguably, as outspoken as Ryan, had measured praise for the ABLI chief, whom he views as something of a chameleon, variously development diva, lobbyist and political guru.

"It's not clear what he is," Amper said, "but he does it very well."

For 2011, at least, Ryan's mission is clear – making sure Long Island gets its fair share of support from the state, which collects \$4 billion more from Nassau and Suffolk each year than it returns.

"Draw your swords, pick up your shields and let's do battle," he declared.

And, sword or ax, let the chips fall where they may.

Winzelberg can be reached at david.winzelberg@libn.com.

