

Nick Spano returns to Albany, as a lobbyist

Gerald McKinstry, The Journal News
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When Nick Spano walks the halls of the state Capitol, he still has a lot of pull. That should come in handy in his new gig as a lobbyist.

Now that a two-year prohibition on lobbying his former colleagues has passed, the former state senator and Republican powerbroker is using his influence and political persuasion to help "clients navigate through the system at the Capitol."

"Albany is about knowing the system. Having served for 28 years, I know how legislators think. I know the pressures they're under," Spano said yesterday. "Those are assets that only someone who has served will know. ... I had a three-decade education."

Just yesterday, the 56-year-old Spano said he was with members of Westchester County's Police Benevolent Association, trying to restore the \$2.4 million that was cut in Gov. David Paterson's budget proposal. Ironically, he met with Sen. Andrea Stewart-Cousins, the Yonkers Democrat who sent him to the private sector in 2006.

"I'm a big boy when it comes to politics," he said, noting that the meeting was cordial and positive.

After losing to Stewart-Cousins two years ago by roughly 2,000 votes, Spano created Empire Strategic Planning, a consulting firm for businesses, local governments and the like. Spano, who is president of the company, is working with his longtime Senate staffer Maureen Kronau.

Though Spano was allowed to try to sway the governor and develop strategies for clients seeking to influence policy immediately after leaving office, he was prohibited from lobbying his former colleagues for two years under state ethics rules.

While not unique to New York, the system vexes some good-government advocates who say the practice is all too common and gives those who pay lobbyists more access than taxpaying citizens.

"It still is a bit of a revolving door," said Susan Lerner, executive director of Common Cause New York. "It definitely would be nice to see some of these people do something other than lobby Albany. ... In Albany, it's a perennial problem. New York is one of the extreme examples because it's such a closed system."

Lerner said a two-year prohibition is reasonable, but lobbyists and other groups should be limited in what they can contribute to candidates - \$500 for governor; \$300 for state Senate and \$250 for Assembly.

In Washington, President Barack Obama promised a "clean break from business as usual" when he banned aides from trying to influence members of his administration when they leave his staff for at least two years and won't allow those who previously have lobbied to work on matters they once tried to influence.

The president instituted the new limits the day after he was sworn in last month and said they were an attempt to fix a broken system.

Spano said that in any business, as in politics, "there are good and bad professionals" and that he would assess his clients' goals and strategies honestly.

"I will operate the same way I operated when I was a legislator," he said.

His clients include Cablevision, Cappelli Enterprises, Ginsburg Development Corp., Greater New York Hospital Association and Yonkers Raceway. Patricia Lynch Associates, which had partnered with his firm on the lobbying side, will remain an equity partner, Spano said.

Spano also will make more money as a lobbyist than he did as a state senator - senators make \$79,500 a year, not including stipends.

"The financial (benefits) are greater," he said. "Having an opportunity to work in the private sector affords an opportunity to make more money."

Spano's lobbying comes amid speculation that he might run again for the office. Despite having \$35,906 in his campaign coffers, Spano said it was unlikely he would soon join his brother in the state Legislature - Michael Spano is a Democratic assemblyman - though he wouldn't rule out a return to elected office altogether.

"Serving in government is, frankly, an addiction," Spano said. "If there's ever an opportunity to make a contribution, I would consider it."

That's something the Westchester Republican Party would welcome, given Spano's "elder statesman" status, said Doug Colety, the party chair.

"I believe Sen. Spano would love to get back to elected office," Colety said. "When the time is right, he may. ... He does miss holding elected office."
Though that time may come, Spano said he's embracing his current job.

"I can personally walk through the halls of the Capitol. For me, it's very gratifying," Spano said. "I'm seeing friends and renewing relationships that go back three decades."

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