

METRO

Pol's big-box about-face

SEVEN MONTHS after she voted with the entire City Council Land Use subcommittee to kill a controversial plan to put a BJ's store in the Bronx, Councilwoman Maria Baez quietly began working behind the scenes to revive it.



Councilwoman Maria Baez

One day last June, the practically unopposed incumbent collected at least \$15,250 in campaign donations from individuals working for companies linked to the project.

Records show Baez (D-W. Bronx) received at least 23 separate checks last June 10 from executives at The Related Companies — the lead developer for the BJ's project — as well as from lawyers and architects working with Related, the owner of the proposed site, and the lobbyist hired by BJ's Wholesale Club to revive the plan.

Last February, the Land Use subcommittee unanimously vot-

Donations turn 'no' to 'yes' for BJ's

BY BILL EGBERT
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

ed down a proposal to put a BJ's big-box food store on Brush Ave. in the East Bronx because of concerns about traffic, the impact on local grocers, and the warehouse chain's anti-union policies.

But in early September, Baez — a protégé and close associate of Bronx Democratic Party boss Jose Rivera — began quietly reaching out to others in the Bronx delegation of which she is now chairwoman, hoping to

work out a Community Benefits Agreement that could help the project move forward.

In addition to a new traffic study meant to allay congestion concerns, Baez offered a draft Community Benefits Agreement prepared with the help of BJ's lobbyist Joni Yoswein, who had given \$500 at the Baez bonanza in June.

The councilwoman also collected 11 other contributions totalling \$8,500 on the same day from employees of The Related Companies.

Related's contributions to Baez represented a staggering 40% of all the campaign money doled out by its employees in 2005.

Baez raked in another \$4,000 from lawyers, consultants and engineering firms linked to the project on the same date, as well

as a \$2,250 check — the largest single donation — from the owner of the Brush Ave. site, Emanuel Ciminello.

This \$15,250 was in addition to \$1,250 in contributions Baez received from individuals connected to the project at an event two weeks earlier on May 20, for a total of \$16,500 — nearly 19% of all the money she raised for her campaign — from parties wanting to reverse her position on the BJ's project.

And with 4-to-1 public matching funds for up to \$250 of each contribution, Baez received an additional \$14,750 in taxpayer money as a result of these contributions in an election that saw her win easily with 95% of the vote.

A Baez staffer told the Daily News, "She has no comment."
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Balancing scales of Bronx justice

BY CHRISENA COLEMAN
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CAN'T AFFORD a civil attorney in the Bronx? No problem!

The Bronx County Office for the Self-Represented, which will help residents navigate their way through civil cases, officially opened yesterday.

While located in the Bronx Supreme Court building, officials said the office will handle referrals from the Civil, Housing, Family and Surrogate's Courts, providing procedural and legal information on a host of civil matters.

It also will serve as a central clearing house for court forms, lawyer referrals and resources from legal and government organizations, they said.

New York State Chief Judge Judith Kaye said she enjoys ribbon-cutting ceremonies because they symbolize the start of something new and terrific.

"And this particular ribbon-cutting is especially exciting because we are providing a great resource that is designed to improve access to justice for the people of the Bronx," said Kaye. "And access to justice is very high on my list.

"Without doubt, the scales of

justice balance best when both sides have equal access to legal representation," she continued. "But we know all too well that the cost of legal services can quickly exceed the average family's budget, and that because of years of funding cuts and waiting lists, many poorer citizens are forced to litigate on their own to protect the very necessities of life."

According to surveys conducted by Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Juanita Bing Newton, the majority of self-represented litigants are low-income, cannot afford a lawyer, don't consult with a lawyer and have relatively little formal education.

Some 83% of the 3,300 persons who participated in the survey were African-American, Asian and Hispanic and approximately 60% said they could not afford an attorney.

Also on hand for yesterday's ribbon-cutting ceremony were Judge Barry Salman, administrative judge of the civil term of the Bronx Supreme Court, and New York State Chief Administrative Judge Jonathan Lippman

For information about the office, go to www.nycourthelp.gov.

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AGLOW WITH HOLIDAY JOY



ANGEL CHEVRETTI

Cutie-pie carolers (from l. to r.) Shavon Fields, 9; Nyasia Mouzon, 5; Jazmine Hill, 10; Sabree Gillis, 12, and Avante Smith, 6, react with glee Tuesday to the Christmas tree lighting at the Metropolitan Oval in Parkchester, the Bronx.