

Advocacy for Manhattan

**An Interview with Ken Biberaj,
Chairman-Board of Directors, Manhattan Chamber of Commerce**

EDITORS' NOTE Ken Biberaj was appointed to his current post in January 2015. He is an executive for his family's real estate company that owns and operates The Russian Tea Room. Additionally, Biberaj was a candidate for City Council on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in 2013.



Ken Biberaj

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The Manhattan Chamber of Commerce (manhattancc.org; MCC) is a 501c6 membership organization supported by its partners, corporate members, and general membership. Their mission is to advocate for, connect with, and educate the business community in Manhattan. The MCC also has two nonprofit arms: The MCC Community Benefit Fund and MCC Foundation.

What interested you in the Manhattan Chamber of Commerce and what do you see as the MCC mission today?

I have always been passionate about supporting small businesses and trying to level the playing field in New York City. The MCC mission today is to fill the void of advocacy for Manhattan as a whole. Right now, there is a great deal of focus on the outer boroughs, which is great, but we cannot forget how important Manhattan is. It is the heart that is pumping blood to the outer boroughs. We are committed to pushing the current Administration in City Hall to pay greater attention to the importance of the small businesses that make Manhattan so unique.

One of the topics we address routinely is the regressive and outdated Commercial Rent Tax (CRT), which only Manhattan businesses must pay. This is not a new issue, but because of our advocacy, it has become a real rallying point for businesses and we hope to have legislation passed this fall in the City Council to reform the CRT.

Is the mission and critical nature of the work the MCC undertakes well understood today?

Most people assume that any business in Manhattan must be doing incredibly well and doesn't need support. Once one gets beyond the larger Fortune 500 companies and sees what is actually happening on the ground, it becomes

clear there are countless businesses that are closing every day or struggling to survive in Manhattan because of things like Commercial Rent Tax.

We have a two-pronged approach where we have to educate people about why it's so difficult to run a business in New York City and offer solutions that are not going to be detrimental to the city budget, but provide real relief to businesses.

Are the small and medium-sized companies the sweet spot for Manhattan Chamber or does it reach across all business sizes?

We reach across all business sizes for membership, but our advocacy is focused on entrepreneurship as a whole. At the end of the day, the MCC is a master-connector for businesses. We help small and mid-size businesses expand their reach while assisting the larger corporate businesses that want to reach smaller B2B partners.

How challenging is it to bring businesses together to create that unifying focus on Manhattan?

It's more of an opportunity. Manhattan is an incredibly diverse borough and there are new parts that are literally being created from the ground up. Look at what has happened with the rebuilding of downtown Manhattan, or at Hudson Yards; there are new opportunities in neighborhoods across Manhattan popping up every day. We need to get our foot in the door and establish ourselves so we can help businesses grow in these new areas.

We also help businesses in neighborhoods from the Upper West Side to the East Village survive in an effort to preserve the character of those communities. At the end of the day, Manhattan is a borough of unique neighborhoods, and we have to strive to preserve the character that makes it so special.

How important is the public/private partnership today and is there enough of a focus on building that?

It's critical. We often talk about the need for tri-sector cooperation. It's beyond just public/private – it also involves nonprofits like the Chamber along with the private sector and the government. The MCC is able to tell the story of so many entrepreneurs to the policy makers. Many elected officials have a single image of what they think business is. They may think

it's just about helping start-ups, but there is a big difference between the needs of start-ups and the small businesses that exist on the ground every day. Those small businesses are more worried about removing bureaucracy and red tape – they're not necessarily looking to disrupt major industries.

We have to serve as the voice for those business owners and tell their story effectively to policy makers. Many of these businesses spend most of their time working and running their business; they don't have the manpower or capacity to think strategically about how to deal with government. This is where the Chamber can step in and help them.

Does it surprise you to see how successful Manhattan has been at attracting that next generation of innovative and entrepreneurial companies?

Despite these challenges with red tape and high taxes, and with business friendliness not being where it should be, New York is still a preferred destination for innovators and entrepreneurs. The foundation that Mayor Bloomberg laid to create Silicon Alley in New York and to offer educational opportunities has been wonderful, but this ripe environment is often taken for granted. We can't just rely on the fact that people will continue to find New York attractive enough to move here and remain here – we have to remain competitive and understand there are other cities around our country and the world that are desperate for some of these innovators and entrepreneurs. We have to encourage government to be more nimble and cooperative with the businesses that create jobs and generate revenue.

How important is it for New York to address the affordability issue in order to keep businesses in the city?

It's imperative that we find a way to create affordable places for people to live and open businesses. At all levels, we need to make sure New York remains dynamic and an attractive environment for businesses versus other states.

As much as we want new businesses to build their infrastructure here, many current ones are moving to other cities and countries. We have to lay the groundwork to remain competitive and address affordability challenges at the policy level if we are going to change this. ●