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## Balancing Act

*The Sohagi Law Group aims to avoid lawsuits and prepares public agencies for trial, too.*

By Glenn Jeffers  
Daily Journal Staff Writer

The epiphany came for Margaret Moore Sohagi during her days as a city planner for Redondo Beach. There, she watched Southern California fill up with newcomers every day. The municipalities grew. Large structures rose up to handle the increasing sprawl. Urban centers formed.

She also noticed the growing traffic and air quality issues that came across her desk.

“I understood that if you’re going to deal with complex land use issues, you have to understand the law,” Sohagi said from the conference room of her Brentwood office.

Fast forward to today, and The Sohagi Law Group PLC is considered a leading firm on environmental and land use matters. Working only with public agencies, the firm specializes in preparing and defending environmental impact reports, ensuring they comply with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

For Sohagi, it means she can help multiple communities expand their facilities and services for residents.

“Maybe it’s a little Pollyanna-ish, but I like the idea that we’re representing the taxpayers,” she said. “Our clients are elected officials —



Glenn Jeffers / Daily Journal

From left, of counsel Albert I. Herson, associate Kiana Amiri-Davani, associate Mark J.G. Desrosiers, partner Nicole H. Gordon, partner R. Tyson Sohagi, managing partner Margaret M. Sohagi

policy-makers — so you’re working with the policy staff as a team to get them where they need to go.”

Those policy-makers need that help. Most of the time, the projects Sohagi Law works on cover a multitude of issues, including affordable housing, climate change, vehicle miles traveled and traffic congestion. Now add the scope of the firm’s projects: Los Angeles International Airport’s \$5.5 billion modernization project, a 122-acre development in Seaside that will include housing, office and retail facilities, and a complete redevelopment of the South Bay Galleria in Sohagi’s old stomping ground of Redondo Beach.

“It’s a balancing act,” said

Nicole H. Gordon, a partner who specializes in advising agencies on the administrative, trial and appellate levels. “Obviously, legal compliance is our primary goal, but there’s a lot of listening and understanding the dynamics of the various stakeholders that goes into getting a successful result and avoiding lawsuits ... and being in a good position to defend them if you can’t.”

But many say the seven-lawyer firm is one of the best at handling that kind of complexity. Sohagi herself is an adjunct professor of land use law at the USC Gould School of Law and an instructor for the Judicial Council of California, where she teaches introductory and advanced

CEQA courses to Superior, Appellate, and Supreme Court Judges and court attorneys.

Sohagi has also handled some of the biggest cases in the state dealing with public agencies and environmental issues. In 2017, she led a team that defended the San Diego Association of Governments against claims the regional transportation agency did not properly address the effects of greenhouse gases in a 2011 environmental impact report.

The case went to the state Supreme Court, which ruled that July the agency’s report did disclose inconsistencies with a 2005 executive order from Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger calling for reduced greenhouse gas emissions. The high

court returned the case to the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals, which later ruled the report was deficient before the two sides settled in April 2018. *Cleveland National Forest Foundation v. San Diego Association of Governments*, 2017 DJDAR 10931.

“She’s just generally well-respected because she’s a very good attorney,” said Rachel B. Hooper, of counsel and former managing partner at Shute, Mihaly & Weinberger LLP in San Francisco.

Hooper was opposing counsel against Sohagi in the transportation agency case, representing several environmental groups as well as state Attorney General Kamala Harris. Hooper said Sohagi was “a pleasure” to work with despite the lengthy court battle.

“She’s a formidable opponent,” Hooper said. “She’s smart. She’s strategic. She’s an excellent lawyer. But the reason I say she’s a pleasure to have on the other side is that she’s very collegial and reasonable.”

Sohagi said that capability comes from her team, a crop of attorneys whose experience and expertise covers a myriad of specialties. Sohagi and of counsel Anne C.H. Lynch and Albert I. Herson are former city planners, with Herson being a recognized CEQA expert and author. Associate Mark J.G. Desrosiers joined the firm

after a year with the city of Glendale.

Associate Kiana Amiri-Davani is a former soil scientist while R. Tyson Sohagi, the founder’s son and a partner, has an engineering degree from UC Berkeley. Initially, he planned to become a mechanical engineer, but after interning with state Sen. Sheila Kuehl, D-Santa Monica, and working on a rapid bus transit project, he found his skill set translated well to the work.

“A lot of what we do is review these highly technical analyses,” R. Tyson Sohagi said. “And what we’re seeing more of from various petitioners groups is really diving into these highly technical appendices ... to find faults in the documentation.”

Amiri-Davani’s path is somewhat similar to Sohagi. She worked for several years as a project scientist for an environmental engineering and consulting firm before transitioning into law. Her moment came when her work moved into supporting environmental litigation. Soon, she was advising on contaminated properties and preparing expert witnesses for trial.

“It was just so awesome,” she said. “As a project scientist, I was in this project management position. Litigation was more strategic. I really enjoyed delving more into the regulatory requirements,

and I liked collaborating with attorneys.”

That sense of collaboration is part of what Amiri-Davani enjoys about Sohagi Law. The firm works on projects together, from reviewing impact reports to putting together a defense.

“Everyone brings something underlying to the table, which is helpful for our field,” Sohagi said.

Equally helpful has been Sohagi’s leadership, said Gordon, who joined the firm after graduating from USC in 2005 with a focus in environmental law. Gordon saw the firm formerly known as Fox & Sohagi — the latter amicably split from Meyers Nave principal Deborah Fox in 2006 — as a promising destination after taking a class Sohagi taught at USC Gould. She later spent a summer clerking for the firm.

“She has a tremendous amount of integrity that comes through in everything that she does,” Gordon said of Sohagi. “It’s an inspiration to work for somebody like that, and I hope I’m following in her footsteps and doing as good of a job as she has.”

Sohagi agrees, already impressed by how Gordon has taken a leadership role within and outside of the firm. Gordon herself has begun teaching classes on CEQA basics at UCLA Extension and recently served as executive committee

chair for the Environmental Law Section of the California Lawyers Association.

“She’s had a hell of a year,” Sohagi said. “That recognition she’s received? Obviously, that’s great for the firm, but as somebody who has taught her and has acted as both the boss as well as a mentor, I love it.”

Within the firm, Gordon has contributed to several projects, including the LAX modernization plan and, most recently, the Commission Public Utilities Commission in a special counsel role. She advises the commission on CEQA compliance for a planned 230-kilovolt transmission line running from its Sycamore Canyon substation in Miramar to another substation in Torrey Hills.

“One of the fun things about the projects we work on is that they are big,” Gordon said. “We’re a small firm, but we work on really big projects.”

Even with a strong group of partners and associates, Sohagi has no plans of handing over the reins though she might take an extra vacation now and then. She has one planned for Amsterdam but chuckled at her sightseeing plans.

“It’s always interesting to go to those cities with an eye towards their land use,” Sohagi said. “You can’t really leave that behind.”

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glenn\_jeffers@dailyjournal.com

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