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TOP 25 MUNICIPAL LAWYERS OF 2011



Robert Levins / Daily Journal

Irma Rodriguez Moisa

As outside labor adviser to the city of Los Angeles and its Coalition of Los Angeles City Unions, Rodriguez Moisa helped craft an agreement requiring represented employees to contribute 4 percent of their salary to cover retiree health benefits.

Faced with a \$250 million budget deficit in fiscal year 2011-12, and a \$450 million deficit for the following year, along with a closed contract, Rodriguez Moisa helped develop the city's bargaining strategy and worked with the impacted unions to address the city's budget shortfall over the course of three years.

The deal we reached had approximately \$250 million in savings over the course of three years, and close to \$600 million over 20 years," she said.

The agreement has a wide-reaching impact, Rodriguez Moisa said, as it sets

a model for other bargaining agreements with other city unions and addresses the city's long-term post-retirement benefit obligations.

"Bargaining is more an art than a science," Rodriguez Moisa observed. "It's about relationships, credibility and, at the end of the day, we were going to have to deal with the budget crisis one way or another."

The deal made sense for all of the parties, she added.

"If they were going to take a pay cut anyway or furloughs, they might as well get something for it," Rodriguez Moisa said. "In this case, it was vested retiree health benefits."

But it's a deal that is not cast in stone.

"We also crafted language in the agreement that, at some later point in time, should the cost of benefits go up, we

MUNICIPAL LAW

Irma Rodriguez Moisa

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Practice Type: Labor and employment

Specialty: Cities, counties, special districts

Big Matter: Rodriguez Moisa served as the outside labor adviser, on behalf of the city of Los Angeles and its Coalition of Los Angeles City Unions, to reach an unprecedented agreement governing retiree health benefits.

agreed to meet and confer to change the employee contribution," Rodriguez Moisa said. "The mayor didn't want to bind future generations. It's a big unknown, with health care reform uncertain. One thing is certain — health care costs will go up."

But, she noted, "We should be looking at employees contributing more to pay for it, and not taking it away."

Municipalities throughout California are searching for ways to stay afloat in these sour economic times, Rodriguez Moisa said.

"In the fall of 2008, we had a financial crisis with Lehman Brothers and banks, and many pension funds went out the window," she said. "What is an agency supposed to do? We need to have some relief if we need to impose changes to have balanced budgets."

How was she able to reach a consensus between the city and the unions?

"Leadership on behalf of both sides, and unions recognizing that there is a problem," Rodriguez Moisa said. "Full and complete communication. 'Here are the books, here is the information.' Being creative. You have to have people coming to the table saying that we have to fix this problem. It's in everybody's interest to make sure that the city thrives."

— Pat Broderick