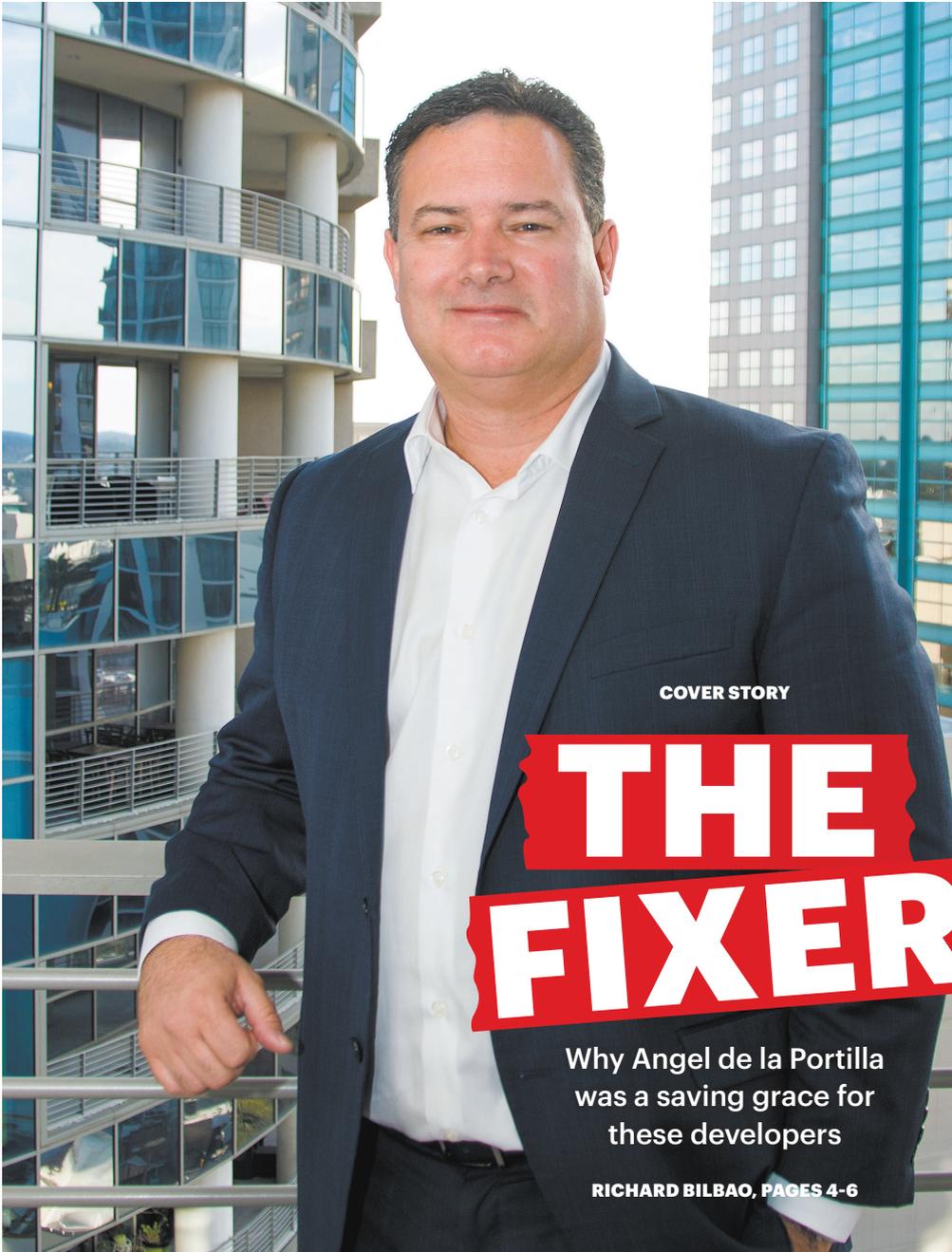


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Why Angel de la Portilla was a saving grace for these developers

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COVER STORY

THE FIXER

WHY MANY OF C. FLA.'S MOST NOTABLE COMPANIES TURN TO THIS BUSINESSMAN TO NAVIGATE GOVERNMENT RED TAPE

BY RICHARD BILBAO | RBILBAO@BIZJOURNALS.COM

Central Florida experienced a rare moment in winter 2015 when a private developer overcame the objections of one of the biggest players in town: Universal Orlando Resort.

At question was the centerpiece of the proposed \$500 million Skyplex entertainment center – the 501-foot-high Skyscraper polercoaster, which would join a drop tower, zip line, hotel, retail complex and more.

Opponents contended the tower would be an eyesore for the International Drive tourist corridor and believed Orange County leaders would reject the proposal. Instead, public speakers showered Skyplex with praise. As a result, the Orange County Commission approved Skyplex unanimously in a win for the little guy.

While local leaders and media crews scrambled to congratulate Skyplex developer Joshua Wallack, a figure stood at Wallack's side, shaking hands with others and quietly basking in yet another victory in a government boardroom.

That man was Angel de la Portilla, president of Orlando government consulting firm Central Florida Strategies Inc.

For de la Portilla, untangling private and public issues – notably ones that lead to wasted money while waiting for government approvals – is what he does best. In fact, getting rid of government red tape is one of his company's tag lines.

With a team that includes only one other associate, the 51-year-old Miami native of Cuban descent often finds himself knee deep in the middle of many of Central Florida's major projects, representing big players in tourism, commercial real estate, public works and local/state government.

He's played a key but somewhat unknown role in about \$1 billion worth of projects in the Orlando area, some completed and others in various stages of construction.

Those who work with de la Por-



Angel de la Portilla

JIM CARCHIDI

tilla – including some of the local business community's most prominent individuals – have said his work is instrumental, and his connections and skills are something they've never seen before.

But it all appears to come naturally to him.

Go-to guy

Not many people are as

good a judge of character as Harris Rosen, founder, president and COO of Orlando-based Rosen Hotels & Resorts.

Rosen, who turns 80 this September, is viewed as the quintessential entrepreneur, building an empire from scratch. He took a single hotel – the now 728-room Rosen Inn at International – and grew that into an eight-hotel, nearly 6,700-room powerhouse portfolio that generated more than \$331 million in revenue last year.

Not only that, Rosen's philanthropic efforts are highly regarded, most notably bringing pre-school-through-college education opportunities to two Central Florida lower-income neighborhoods, Tangelo Park and Parramore.

In short: Rosen didn't gain his success without hard work and making the right decisions – including choosing who he works with. And de la Portilla is one of those.

Rosen began working with him around 2011, when a joint venture between the New York Yankees and a private developer wanted to build a \$47 million baseball complex on land between the Orange County Convention Center and the Rosen Plaza.

The Yankees' involvement made it a popular proposal to the public, and a large lobbying team worked hard to garner support from many locals – except Rosen, who opposed it back then because he said it didn't work for the area.

Rosen sought out de la Portilla to help demonstrate to local leaders that the project would harm local businesses and wasn't a good deal.

Those efforts succeeded, and the project didn't garner enough support for approval.

"That was the beginning of what has become a long relationship, one I have grown to respect and admire,"

Rosen said. "It's not easy what Angel does. He's working with the private and public sectors, where there are natural challenges when one traverses those two different worlds."

Other projects the two worked together on included development of the Gary Sain Memorial Bridge that since 2013 has connected the Rosen Plaza to the convention center.

They also teamed up on many Orange County proposals related to the lucrative tourist development tax on hotel sales, which often is used for upgrades to the convention center, as well as in the past for big downtown Orlando projects, such as the Camping World Stadium renovations, and devel-

"He's steady. We all as human beings have a tendency to get emotional about things, but I have never witnessed that in Angel. He is always calm. And that is an important attribute for someone in his position to have."

— HARRIS ROSEN

opment of the Amway Center and Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts.

However, one tourist development tax-related proposal wasn't a successful venture for the duo.

Rosen was a vocal supporter of an amendment to Orange County's charter for an application process regarding any projects or events that wanted to tap into the county's tourist development tax fund. The proposal required owners or developers to clearly state their projects' economic impact to help county leaders better use resort tax dollars.

Rosen was passionate about it since he not only paid the tax, but his hotels also benefit from convention center improvements that would draw more business to Orlando.

While the proposal didn't make it onto the November 2016 ballot, it wasn't a complete loss: The amendment's public support resulted in the creation of new oversight committees, like the Tourist Development Tax Application Review Committee and the

Tourist Development Tax Sports Incentive Committee.

That was good enough for Rosen and de la Portilla.

"It's not about win or lose; it's about working out a resolution that's good for both parties," Rosen told *OBJ*. "You aim for some resolution, and while it can be very unlikely and difficult, you may be offered something that makes you say, 'Oh, that's interesting. Not what we wanted, but we are better off with that than nothing.'"

After those experiences, Rosen said he greatly values de la Portilla's work.

"He's steady," Rosen said. "We all as human beings have a tendency to get emotional about things, but I have never witnessed that in Angel. He is always calm. And that is an important attribute for someone in his position to have."

That steadiness also was key in bringing some of the region's more high-profile projects to town.

Angel on their shoulders

Years before the Skyplex vote in Orange County, cars whizzed along I-Drive as Wallack spoke to someone he knew would be vital for his future in Orlando.

Wallack needed help landing government approvals to redevelop a 55,000-square-foot shuttered Friday's Front Row Sports Grill restaurant and bar into a \$30 million nightclub and dinner show called Mango's Tropical Cafe Orlando – a sister location to a popular South Beach attraction.

"I came to Orlando in December 2012 and really didn't know anyone," Wallack told *OBJ*. "I was just known as the 'Mango's guy from Miami.'"

Figuring out how to build his projects was a challenge for Wallack, he said, because it wasn't easy dealing with Orange County government at the time.

That changed when Rosen passed along de la Portilla's name.

"It was him keeping my rudder in the right direction," Wallack said. "As challenges came up, such as preparing to present to the Orange County Commission or planning boards, he looked at it all from multiple peoples' perspectives to see things clearly – not just by your groups, but how your adversaries perceive it."

Those skills helped Wallack secure the county's OK for Mango's Trop-



Harris Rosen



Joshua Wallack

ical Cafe Orlando, which opened in 2016, as well as the adjacent \$30 million Hollywood Plaza complex in 2018, not to mention the yet-to-be-developed Skyplex.

Meanwhile, less than a mile away, the region's newest go-kart attraction offers another example of de la Portilla's steady hand. Andretti Indoor Karting & Games co-owner Stan Manousos, another de la Portilla client, said "speaking government" is a vital skill in new markets. The \$35 million, 135,000-square-foot entertainment facility across from the Orange County Convention Center opened in 2017, which Manousos credited to de la Portilla's help in opening doors and getting through the approval process – even saving close to \$1 million in impact fees.

"His core strength is he knows a lot of people and can get you in front of them," Manousos told *OBJ*.

But what really made a difference in planning and developing Andretti Indoor Karting & Games was the realistic timeframe de la Portilla provided, because time is money, Manousos said.

If officials had said it would take a week to complete, de la Portilla was able to couch it with his experience – sometimes telling clients the normal course was more like 30 days.

"We weren't left waiting on the edge of our seats because he set an expectation for us," Manousos said.

Both Wallack and Manousos agreed their Orlando ventures wouldn't have been as easy to complete without de la Portilla's assistance.

"He can cut a lot of mistakes. Too many foul balls and trial-and-error costs people a lot of money, and can end up killing a business venture," Wallack said.

Added Manousos: "We've never worked with someone like him before. But it worked out so well to the point where I have asked him if there are Angels in other cities where we are looking to expand – I know he's making those calls to find out."

After all, finding those connections is just another day at the office for de la Portilla.

FAMILY TIES

WHAT DRIVES ANGEL DE LA PORTILLA? IT'S IN HIS BLOODLINE

When most people trace their lineage, they're lucky to find results three or four generations back.

For Angel de la Portilla and his family, it leads back even further. "We traced our family roots all the way back to Spain, and I am a direct descendant of the second Spanish governor of Florida, Rodrigo del Junco, who was appointed by the king of Spain in the 1590s," de la Portilla told *Orlando Business Journal* — proof that his political influences go back 15 generations in his family.

More recently, de la Portilla's political background links to when his family lived in Cuba during the early years of the Fidel Castro regime. Both his parents were Cuban exiles, who left for political reasons, he said.

"My mother came to the U.S. at the age of 16 after she and her sister were distributing propaganda against Fidel Castro in their school," de la Portilla said. "The [school's] head nun found out and told my grandfather she could get arrested if the government found out. They thought they were going to be in the U.S. for six months, but they never went back."

His father's story is similar: Castro in 1961 visited de la Portilla's grandfather — a prominent attorney in Matanzas, Cuba — to solidify support, but was rejected by de la Portilla's grandfather. Three days later, his father's family had to move to the U.S. and never returned to their homeland.

As a youth, de la Portilla was drawn to politics. In grade school, he volunteered for Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign, which resulted in him visiting the White House during the Reagan administration and, later, when George H.W. Bush was in office.

"I'm passionate about it. I love being involved in business, politics and government," he said.

That passion wasn't missed on one of his mentors, NAI Realvest founder and former Chairman George Livingston, who died in 2017. Livingston offered some sage advice to him, de la Portilla said, during a short stint at NAI Realvest, which paved the way for Central Florida Strategies.

"He said: 'Angel, you're really not meant to be in real estate because you have a lot of good political relationships. You should somehow look to leverage those relationships into something other than real estate.'" de la Portilla said. "And so that's what I was going to be: a governmental representative for real estate developers."

PROJECT LIST:

CENTRAL FLORIDA STRATEGIES

Central Florida Strategies Inc. was founded in 2008, and in that decade, it arguably has made a huge impact in Greater Orlando's landscape for years to come.

The Orlando-based company, which provides government consulting services, has a client list that includes major developers and public entities, ranging from Rosen Hotels & Resorts to contractors of Orlando

International Airport. It also worked with entities that oversaw or participated in major regional projects, like renovations at Camping World Stadium.

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JIM CARCHIDI

WALLACK HOLDINGS LLC

This is the developer of Mango's Tropical Cafe restaurant and nightclub, and the \$30 million Hollywood Plaza entertainment/parking complex on International Drive. Wallack Holdings also plans to develop the future \$500 million Skyplex project, anchored by the 501-foot-high Skyscraper polercoaster, along with a drop tower, zipline, surf park, shops, restaurants, hotel and more. Central Florida Strategies helped Wallack Holdings secure local government approvals, most notably assisting in getting the OK for the Skyscraper on I-Drive, which initially was opposed by big players like Universal Orlando Resort.

ANDRETTI INDOOR KARTING & GAMES

The \$35 million, 135,000-square-foot entertainment facility was partly created by the Andretti racing family. The center opened in 2017 across from the Orange County Convention Center. Central Florida Strategies connected Andretti's representatives with the right government officials and helped address impact fees the developer would need to pay.



Andretti Indoor Karting

RICHARD BILBAO

ROSEN HOTELS & RESORTS

The Orlando-based operator of eight hotels with nearly 6,700 rooms is led by one of Orlando's most influential businesspeople: Harris Rosen. The firm also is very active in philanthropy and government-related issues that impact the Orange County Convention Center and the county's tourist development tax. Central Florida Strategies provided consulting for Rosen Hotels regarding proposed projects near its properties.



Camping World Stadium

JIM CARCHIDI

FLORIDA CITRUS BOWL RENOVATION

A \$190 million contract for the revamp of downtown Orlando's Florida Citrus Bowl stadium — now Camping World Stadium — required major negotiations due to the usage of Orange County's tourist development taxes. Central Florida Strategies served as a government consultant for several parties during the ongoing discussions that led to the contract approval.

CITY OF OCOEE

Central Florida Strategies serves as the city's economic development consultant on major projects, such as the revitalization of the State Road 50 corridor, downtown Ocoee and West Oaks Mall.

ORLANDO INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT EXPANSION

Central Florida Strategies represented construction firms working on the airport's new \$2.15 billion south terminal project.