



Bill Clark/Roll Call

Merribel Ayres, who runs Lighthouse Consulting Group, moonlights as a cabaret performer, and her audience often includes some of the same people she lobbies on Capitol Hill.

For One Lobbyist, Life Actually Is a Cabaret

BY KATE ACKLEY

Street Talk

You can't accuse Merribel Ayres of pursuing a cliché K Street hobby.

Most lobbyists take up golf. Some spend their after-work hours sailing, fishing or working out at the gym.

Ayres, who runs Lighthouse Consulting Group, serenades officials, clients and colleagues in cabaret shows during her spare time.

"I approach it much the same way I do lobbying or political work," Ayres said. "No matter how much preparation you've done, there's always improvisation and creativity with the audience."

Ayres, who grew up singing but retired at age 13, began taking voice lessons in 2001 after her marriage broke up. She eventually hired Lise Bruneau, whose 25-year career credits include the Shakespeare Theatre Company and the Arena Stage, to direct her performances. Musical director and Broadway composer Daniel Sticco handles the score.

Her next show, "The Secret of Life," is just a few weeks away. To prepare for the invite-only affair at a foreign embassy in Northwest D.C.'s Kalorama neighborhood, Ayres said she has embarked on an intense workout of music making and staging.

The program includes songs by Jacques Brel, Stephen Sondheim, Irving Berlin and James Taylor. And her guests — though she won't disclose their names — have included Members of Congress, executive branch appointees, corporate executives and Congressional aides from both sides

of the aisle.

"I saw her do a performance of a few numbers in a more informal situation, and then I went to the last show at the Four Seasons. The first thing you have to say is it takes a lot of guts," said client Bill Tyndall, Duke Energy Corp.'s senior vice president for federal policy. "She obvi-

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Bill Tyndall, Duke Energy's senior vice president for federal policy

ously enjoys her singing and throws herself into that just like she throws herself into her job for her clients."

But don't expect her to give up her lobbying gig.

"People have always told me, 'You could've gone into the theater. You could've been a director,'" she said. "But I tell them, 'I am a director.' My work at Lighthouse informs the theater."

Ayres, whose 14-year-old boutique firm brought in \$2.4 million in lobbying and other consulting fees last year, focuses on energy legislation. Her clients include Alliance Pipeline, AES Corp. and the U.S. Climate Action Partnership, a coalition of companies and groups that lobbies for a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Duke Energy, the Environmental Defense Fund, the Nature Conservancy, General

Motors Co. and Shell are members of the coalition.

She decided to set up her own shop after serving as CEO of the National Independent Energy Producers.

"I was on the other side of the table running a trade association and hiring any number of lobby firms and public re-

bying, especially in an election year that could dramatically transform the outlook for her issues in the next Congress. In this election cycle, she has contributed to the campaigns of Democratic and Republican Members, including Sens. Harry Reid (D-Nev.), Max Baucus (D-Mont.) and Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), as well as Reps. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) and Rick Boucher (D-Va.), according to Federal Election Commission records.

"The outcome of the elections will inform the lay of the land on energy legislation," she said. "This is an assessment period."

"We're evaluating what's a smart, different way to approach energy and environmental policy goals with a changed political dynamic," Ayres added. "You have to embrace the changes."

Just like improvisational moments in cabaret, "it's organic," she said. "There will be some new opportunities with a more balanced Congress."

Tyndall said seeing Ayres perform cabaret is a stark contrast to sitting across a table from her during a policy strategy session plotting for the next session on Capitol Hill.

"It's taking yourself totally out of normal business interaction and doing something completely different," he said. "The only thing that comes across is how much she loves doing it and how much fun she's having. It's contagious."

Tyndall added, "It's a little lesson about doing what you want to do and taking risks, even if people are not going to think that it's the normal thing that a Washington power broker should be doing."

lations firms," Ayres said. "I came to the conclusion there was a gap, a need for a firm that had an integrated approach to politics, policy, messaging and communications in the energy and environment community."

She said her business model is about more than "just getting a meeting" on Capitol Hill.

"Getting the meetings is the easy part," Ayres said. "It's about knowing how to make the best of the information that you use at the meetings."

She said her lobbying firm is bipartisan, but cabaret, well, that's nonpartisan.

"When you get into the arts, it's about being expansive," she said.

Ayres, who once worked for the late Rep. William Cotter (D-Conn.), said she tries to bring a similar open attitude to lob-