

How Robert Mercer impacts local battles in New York

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ALBANY - Robert Mercer spent millions to help propel Donald Trump into the White House and back far-right outlets, causes and advocates, including Breitbart News and Stephen Bannon.

Away from the national spotlight, however, the wealthy Long Island hedge-fund manager's financial influence is found at the most-granular, hyperlocal levels in his home state of New York through a nonprofit with a dramatic name that's quickly expanding its presence.

[Reclaim New York](#), the four-year-old watchdog group, is the brainchild of its founder, chairman, treasurer and director: Rebekah Mercer, who runs a foundation that helps distribute her father's considerable wealth to a wide variety of mostly conservative causes.

The New York City-based nonprofit has been expanding its presence at the local-government level across the state, building up its considerable social media following in hopes of mobilizing citizens to push their local-government officials to reign in fees, taxes and other factors that drive up the cost of living.

The group touts itself as "nonpartisan" and "independent."

But the conservative, small-government beliefs shared by the Mercers are present throughout the positions the group takes at both the local and state level, with Gov. Andrew Cuomo's administration accusing Reclaim of being a front to espouse Mercer's views.

[Robert Mercer leaving hedge fund, selling Breitbart stake](#)

[Breitbart News funder Robert Mercer has Westchester roots](#)

In a statement, Reclaim executive director Brandon Muir said the group's board members -- which include Rebekah Mercer and her sister, Jennifer -- "believe deeply in our mission of supporting grassroots engagement."

"They helped launch Reclaim and continue to be supportive, because of programmatic work like fighting illegal fees and pushing local governments to be more transparent," Muir said. "The outside political activities of board members do not involve Reclaim."

Some of the group's targets aren't convinced.

"It's an astroturf organization masquerading as a good-government group in order to cynically push a billionaire's extreme right-wing agenda into Albany's bloodstream," Cuomo spokesman Rich Azzopardi said.



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Brandon Muir, Executive Director of Reclaim New York, at a press conference on the Transparency Project which is pushing for transparency to be made available by local government to their citizens, at the Westchester County Courthouse in White Plains on Nov. 15, 2016. (Photo: Ricky Flores/The Journal News)

Reclaim's beginnings

Reclaim's only known funders are Robert Mercer, who spent his early career at IBM in Westchester, and the Mercer Family Foundation, which contributed more than \$1.3 million to the group from 2013 through 2015, according to state and federal tax documents reviewed by the USA Today Network's Albany Bureau.

Reclaim New York was founded in 2013 with \$40,000 in seed money, according to state charity filings. Since then, it has expanded to a staff of 10 with three regional directors, including George Phillips, a former Republican congressional candidate from the Binghamton area.

The nonprofit received contributions of \$1.25 million in 2015 -- all of which came from the Mercer Family Foundation, according to the group and foundation's tax filings.

Reclaim counted Bannon, Trump's controversial former chief strategist and current head of Breitbart News, as one of its founding directors, though he stepped down after joining Trump's campaign in 2016.

Earlier this year, Reclaim expanded to create a lobbying branch funded with a \$75,000 personal contribution from Robert Mercer, state ethics board filings show.

Reclaim frequently comments on state issues, knocking Cuomo, for example, for his support of [\\$420 million a year in annual tax credits for film and television projects](#) and ripping Albany for ethical lapses.

Local work

But the bulk of its work comes at the local level, where the nonprofit holds training sessions on pocketbook issues in the Southern Tier, Hudson Valley and Long Island.

The group has blanketed local governments and school districts with Freedom of Information Law requests seeking to build a database of local spending.

When it doesn't get the information it's seeking, Reclaim sues. So far, it has sued 11 school districts and governments, including the Peekskill and Beacon school districts and the village of Spring Valley.

CLOSE 

Reclaim New York held a press conference announcing transparency project in government allowing everyday citizens to file FOIL local governments without hinderance. Ricky Flores/lohud

Reclaim's social media following is formidable, including 118,000 likes on Facebook, where Reclaim touts its training sessions across the state.

The group's lobbying arm, the Reclaim New York Initiative, has taken to weighing in on inherently local issues: The [Mount Vernon city budget](#). A push to curtail natural gas usage in a small Tompkins County town. A plan to build a new Cortland County jail. And a \$200 fee on real-estate deals in Suffolk County, home to Mercer.

Often, the group asks its supporters to mobilize and contact their local officials.

"Call or email your city councilmember," the Reclaim New York Initiative wrote on its blog about the Mount Vernon budget. "Tell them you want a responsible budget, not one based on padding pockets and political handouts."

In Peekskill, Reclaim sued last November when the district didn't initially turn over check numbers when the group filed a FOIL request for various spending documents. The district pushed back publicly, claiming disclosure of check numbers would be an invasion of privacy; Reclaim pushed back harder.

"Unfortunately, for Peekskill Schools and their taxpayers, attempting to save face took precedent over admitting their failure to provide the basic transparency citizens deserve," the group wrote in a statement at the time.

The district ultimately provided the documents before the case made its way to a judge, who declined to force the district to pay Reclaim's attorney fees, according to John Gross, an attorney for the Peekskill schools.

He suggested the spat could have been solved with a phone call, not a lawsuit.

"Had they called us -- they never did," Gross said. "They just started to litigate."

Mercer funding

Mercer's backing of the group has drawn the ire of some of those it criticizes, who say Reclaim is nothing more than a front for its wealthy backers.

One target has been Cuomo's administration, which has drawn frequent criticism from Reclaim on a variety of issues, including tax breaks. Cuomo is seeking re-election next year and is considered a potential presidential candidate in 2020.

Azzopardi, the Cuomo spokesman, dismissed Reclaim New York's efforts.

"This outright deception should concern everyone," he said.

The Mercers, meanwhile, are often described as reclusive, rarely commenting on its political or governmental strategies and beliefs.

They have ownership stakes in Breitbart, the far-right news website run by Bannon that is loathed by liberals and centrists, though [Robert Mercer recently said he will sell his stake](#) to his daughter.

A spokesman for Robert Mercer did not respond to a request for comment on his backing of Reclaim New York or his family's goals for the nonprofit.



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Brandon Muir, Executive Director of Reclaim New York, at a press conference on the Transparency Project which is pushing for transparency to be made available by local government to their citizens, at the Westchester County Courthouse in White Plains on Nov. 15, 2016. (Photo: Ricky Flores/The Journal News)

Mercer did, however, offer a rare glimpse into his political beliefs last week when he sent an email to employees of Renaissance Technologies -- the Suffolk County-based hedge fund where he derived his wealth -- to tell them he would soon step down as co-CEO.

"I believe that a collection of individuals making their own decisions within the confines of a clear and concise set of laws that they have determined for themselves will advance society much more effectively than will a collection of experts who are confident in their knowledge of what is best for everyone else," Mercer wrote.

"This is why I support conservatives, who favor a smaller, less powerful government."

Reclaim is far from the only New York advocacy or watchdog group backed at least in part by funders on one side or other of the political spectrum.

The left-leaning, Ithaca-based Park Foundation, for example, has provided funding for various advocacy organizations in New York, including [a wide array of anti-fracking groups](#) and government-reform organizations like Common Cause/NY and the New York Public Interest Research Group.

Labor unions, meanwhile, have long funded left-leaning think tanks like the Fiscal Policy Institute.

'Right-wing billionaire'

Cuomo himself has taken aim at the Mercer family in recent weeks, with the Cuomo-controlled state Democratic Committee airing a television ad targeting Mercer's \$1 million contribution to a PAC supporting Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino, a Republican.

In an email to Democratic supporters, Cuomo called the Mercers "right-wing billionaires who bankrolled Donald Trump's presidential campaign and the extremist Breitbart News."

"Now they've set their sights on New York because we're fighting to elect Democrats now and in the 2018 elections," Cuomo wrote. "It's up to us to stop them."

Astorino ultimately lost Tuesday to state Sen. George Latimer, D-Rye, who was repeatedly critical of the Mercers' support for his opponent.

Reclaim's leaders, meanwhile, have fought off suggestions their group is tied to far-right causes, repeatedly painting the organization as "nonpartisan" and distancing it from its funders' political activities.

"There is no connection of any kind between Reclaim and the disgusting, racist 'alt right', and any suggestion otherwise is a lie," Doug Kellogg, Reclaim's communications director, said in a statement last week.

Muir, Reclaim's executive director, called the group a "non-partisan, non-profit organization that empowers citizens to take ownership of their government."

"More engagement from New Yorkers makes our state more affordable, grows our economy, more respectful of the taxpayer and ultimately less corrupt," he said.

"If public officials believe they can ignore workable solutions to make the state more affordable, putting special interests ahead of the real needs of people, things will only get worse."

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