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FRIEND OF THE PEOPLE IT SERVES

Helmsley ex-chef's claim to fee disputed

Lawsuit's dismissal sought

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Chef Dennis Sammarone may have offered his goodwill to set up a meeting between his former boss, Leona Helmsley, and a developer who bought an expensive tract in Fort Lee from her.

But that gives him no legal claim to a share of the \$46.3 million deal, the developer's attorney argued in a Hackensack courtroom Friday.

"If you don't have a broker's license, you are barred from any attempts to collect a commission," said Stuart Glick, the attorney for developer James Bovino.

Glick asked Superior Court Judge Menelaos Toskos to throw out a lawsuit by Sammarone, who says Bovino ignored a promise to lavish him with compensation worth \$5 million if he put him in touch with Helmsley.

"I feel that I will get my chance in court," Sammarone

said after the hearing Friday. "I am not asking for any more than what he promised."

Toskos said he will issue a written decision in the coming weeks.

Sammarone was a longtime cook and a close friend of Helmsley's. His former boss's "difficult personality was virtually legendary," and she wasn't even taking Bovino's calls until Sammarone got involved, said the chef's attorney, Angelo Genova.

Glick argued that New Jersey's real estate law, in an attempt to protect buyers from fraud and in-

competent practice, requires brokers to be licensed if they want to collect commissions.

He said courts have ruled in the past against those who have tried to circumvent the law by calling themselves different names and seeking "contractual compensation" instead of a "broker's commission."

Genova, however, said the victim in this case is not Bovino the buyer. He portrayed the issue as one between a wealthy, sophisticated company versus a chef with no knowledge of real estate.

"You have one of the most

successful developers in the region going to the [negotiation] table with a chef," Genova said. "Who is being taken advantage of? They duped him. They used him. They got what they wanted. And now they want to drop him like a hot potato."

Bovino's company has since been designated as a redeveloper of the 16-acre property near the George Washington Bridge, where a \$700 million project is under way to build hundreds of residential units, as well as retail and office space.

Sammarone said he met

Helmsley 25 years ago when she and her late husband, Harry, dined at a Manhattan restaurant where he worked.

"She loved the lobster I prepared and asked me if I could cook for her," said Sammarone, 51, of Blairstown.

Despite her notoriety as the arrogant "Queen of Mean," Leona Helmsley always treated him with respect, he said.

"I think she is a good person," he said. "If you are a good chef, people remember you."

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