

Jack George

Helping to Shape the City of Chicago

by Dan Rafter

Take a look at some of the most important buildings in Chicago. The odds are high that John J. George played a role in making these projects a reality.

George, shareholder with Chicago's **Schuyler Roche & Crisham, P.C.** has earned a reputation as one of the top real estate, land use and zoning attorneys in Chicago. And during his more than 40 years in real estate law, George has helped shape the famed skyline of his city.

What has made George so successful? There's no secret formula. He provides top service to his customers. He has an in-depth knowledge of real estate law. He is committed to his clients. But there's one more trait that has made George a leader in his field: passion. He remains as passionate about practicing law today as he was more than four decades ago.



"To the regular guy on the street, real estate can be dull," George says. "To me it is never dull. I've never lost my enthusiasm for being a part of all these incredible projects.

"My family might sometimes want to clobber me. I drive around with them in the city, and I can't help but point out the different buildings that we've worked on. I'm sure as I drive around the city they get tired of that. But I am really proud of what I have done and what I have worked on. I'm always just one guy on a project, but it is always an exciting thing for me to be a part of."

Making a Big Impact

George and his team at Schuyler Roche & Crisham have played important roles in several of downtown Chicago's iconic buildings.

George and his fellow attorneys, for instance, worked to pave the way for 805 North LaSalle, a 295-unit high-end apartment building now in the finishing stages of construction at the northeast corner of Chicago Avenue and LaSalle Street. George and his team members negotiated with a neighboring land owner to allow

Smithfield Development to gain ownership of additional land. This allowed the developer to expand the site before construction.

The legal team then up-zoned this parcel so it would have the same zoning as the remainder of the project site. Throughout the process, George and his team members negotiated with city officials, agencies, aldermen and surrounding neighbors to allow Smithfield Development to move ahead with its plans.

George has worked, too, with the Kennedy family, owners of Wolf Point, to help clear the way for the start of construction at the mixed-use Wolf Point development. Located where the three branches of the Chicago River converge, this construction site is one of the highest profile slices of land in the city.

Plans for Wolf Point include more than 100,000 square feet of park land, landscaped planting beds and more than 400 square feet of river-walk space. Plans also call for three mixed-use towers — West Tower, South Tower and East Tower — to be built in three phases. Construction has

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already started on the West Tower, which is expected to open for occupancy in the fall of 2015.

George faced a daunting task from Wolf Point owners: He and his legal team had the challenge of securing the zoning rights for the towers.

George and the legal team at Schuyler Roche & Crisham did this by working hard, scheduling countless meetings with city officials and staffers and, most importantly, listening to everyone from the ward's alderman to neighbors of the proposed development.

This last part — listening —often means the difference between a successful development and one that fails to receive approval from the city, George says.

"There are usually a number of changes that are made to the big projects in the city," George says. "These changes often come from the developer, but they also come from the input that developers receive from the city or from land planners. You have to be able to listen to those people and understand what their suggestions are. You have to figure out a way to adapt those suggestions and incorporate them into the project so that it can work for everyone."

Listening matters, too, when it comes to working and negotiating with the neighbors of projects and with community groups, George says.

During the zoning phase of the Wolf Point project, George and his fellow attorneys attended community meetings where they listened to the concerns of neighbors and community groups. They also responded to these concerns, forging compromises where possible and providing explanations to neighboring residents.

"In most of the cases now, you are required to have community hearings where you present your case to a community group and listen to the input from these groups," George says. "One thing that has benefited me throughout my career is that I do listen. I try to listen to and understand what people have to say."

"People come to a community hearing and speak out against a project because they have legitimate concerns. Our job is to help out and see how we can respond to these concerns in a concrete way. This doesn't mean that we give neighbors and community groups everything they want, but it does mean that we work with these people to develop solutions when we can."

Lee Golub, principal with Chicago investment and development company Golub & Company, says George has been an asset to his company as it works with Chicago officials to gain approval for its own development projects.

"We love working with Jack," Golub says. "He's very diligent. And he has great relationships with aldermen and city staffers. He has forged the personal relationships that can make a real difference when you're trying to gain approval for a project. He has great relationships with all the aldermen."

Golub has worked with George for more than 20 years. That long-term relationship is one George has earned with his commitment to Golub and with the results he's gained for them.

"He is the one we like to work with," Golub says. "And we're far from alone. All the city officials, staffers and planners respect him. They all have a great relationship with Jack because they know how hard he works and how diligent he is in his planning."

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Jack George's Varied Career

George has enjoyed a particularly diverse career. He is a former assistant attorney general and assistant corporation counsel for the City of Chicago. Since his time with the city, George has, of course, represented the biggest names in real estate development in zoning and land use matters.

George, though, has also handled litigation in state and federal courts, and has appeared in proceedings before administrative tribunals and in arbitrations. He has also tackled appeals before the Illinois Appellate Court, the Supreme Court of Illinois and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit.

But like many top attorneys, it took George most of his undergraduate career to decide that law was a field that would appeal to him. George earned his bachelor's degree from Xavier University in Cincinnati, where he majored in economics. While taking classes there, George noticed that a group of students was forming the university's first pre-law society. George joined that group

and was quickly hooked on law.

In his senior year, George made the move to pursue a career in law. He applied to DePaul University College of Law in Chicago. Again, he discovered that the fundamentals of law fascinated him.

While in law school, George clerked for the Illinois Attorney General's office. During his time there, George worked with several different departments. He performed well there, and stayed with the office after his graduation.

"I was given the opportunity to work in different areas of the law," George says. "But I always felt that real estate law was the right choice for me."

This feeling proved right. Eventually, George left the city and took on his first zoning case, one for a project in downtown Chicago. The process of obtaining zoning for the project gave George a thrill that he still experiences when helping developers turn their building plans into reality.

"I enjoyed everything about that first zoning case," George says. "I liked bringing people together. I liked working with experts from so many different areas. I enjoyed the whole process of getting zoning approved for this project. This was the first planned development that I had worked on. I really enjoyed it. For me, it was — and still is — a rewarding experience. I've been fortunate to have worked on several other major projects during my career. I've been able to work on projects that have shaped our city."

Making the Big Projects Happen

Count Joel Carlins as one of the many developers in Chicago who is happy that George decided to follow his passion and pursue a career in real estate law. Carlins is co-chief executive officer of Chicago's Magellan Development Group. Carlins' company was the developer of Lakeshore East, the 28-acre master-planned community in the northeastern part of the Loop.

This project was a complicated one, consisting of a six-acre park; the Village Market retail center that features Mariano's, Eggy's Diner and other retailers; high-end apartment units; condominiums; and luxury townhomes.

Carlins cites the work George did as one reason why Lakeshore East exists. "That was a very difficult project to go through as far as getting zoning and city approvals," Carlins says. "We had to go through 30 to 40 different agencies to get approvals. George spearheaded all of that for us. He

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did a fabulous job.”

Carlins is another in a line of long-time clients for George. Magellan Development and George have worked together for more than 25 years. Carlins says Magellan Development works with George because the attorney isn't afraid of putting in the long hours — and doing the necessary research — to give real estate projects every chance of gaining the city approvals they need.

“He works very hard,” Carlins says. “He must be at hearings three to five times a week. He is a real expert on zoning issues. On the personal side, we have found Jack to be very honorable, very reasonable. He doesn't tell you he can do things that can't actually be accomplished. We will continue to work with him. I don't think we'll ever find anyone better.”

The good news for George's clients? He isn't ready to slow his career. He enjoys his work too much.

As George says, real estate law allows him to see projects progress from plans on paper to construction cranes to finished buildings. And shepherding projects through these stages requires George to tap into a host of legal and negotiation talents.

“It's not just about getting the zoning,” George says. “It's about everything that comes with it. Today, when you take on a project, it involves more than just rezoning a property.

“You have to work out traffic problems. People are concerned about landscaping and the appeal of a building. You have to worry about the pedestrian experience. You can't just put up buildings without knowing what the experience will be like for the people walking past them. You can't just have buildings come down to the ground with cement around them.”

Then there is the impact that George's work has had on the city. George enjoys helping to better Chicago and its neighborhoods, something he can do by helping to move major projects through the development process. And that, too, is a thrill that never gets old, he says.

Consider Lakeshore East. George still remembers having a cheeseburger with Carlins as they looked at the old golf course that once sat on land that is now home to Lakeshore East.

“Joel had a vision for what was going to happen there. He asked me, ‘How do you think we can do it?’” George says. “He told me his vision, and I tried to determine how to do it from a zoning standpoint.

“Now look at Lakeshore East. It is now one of the most beautiful areas of our city. It's a whole new area that had never been developed.” ■