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THE GEORGES

Navigating Their Clients Through the Complexities of Urban Redevelopment

by Mike Bailey



In the bewildering world of urban redevelopment, one Chicago law firm has a demonstrated track record of getting a project over the finish line. That consistent and reliable performance is not achieved by guile, but by adherence to a set of principles and a reputation for honesty.

It has taken years, but Jack George and his daughter and protégé, Meg, have helped establish Akerman LLP as one of the premier real estate development law firms in Chicago.

The George family dominates redevelopment law in Chicago, advising on massive and complex projects that have shaped the growth and expansion of Chicago and will influence it well into the future.

What makes it all work is that Meg and Jack are not only complementary business partners but they also deeply respect each other and work in harmony to create more value than either of them could alone.

Jack established his reputation over many years through the successful completion of countless projects in Chicago and is considered the premier attorney in his field by many in

the redevelopment business.

“Our company has used Jack George for over the past 20 years,” says Joel Carlins, co-CEO of Magellan Development. “I am a developer and an attorney since 1960. Our company has retained Jack for virtually all of our development in the city of Chicago. Several have had a number of complexities, which were uncommon to most of our past developments. He always has been able to assist us in obtaining reasonable solutions and approvals.”

Jack’s projects are behemoths, often rising above the city skyline or reshaping prime real estate along some of the most famous boulevards in the country.

“We have, during that time developed approximately 40 mixed-use residential developments with an aggregate of about 15,000 residential units, hotels, commercial and retail uses,” Carlins adds.

“Our Lakeshore East Development is approximately 27 acres of land, pre-zoned, with a flexible formula for use, and it enables us to develop approximately 10 million square feet of mixed uses. It is one of the largest urban

developments in the country and what we consider ‘a village in the heart of the city.’

“We also are currently developing Vista, which will be the third tallest residential development in Chicago consisting of 101 stories, all of which have had the assistance of Jack, with respect to various requirements including all zoning and most governmental approvals required. I consider Jack also a very good friend and can attest to his qualities of truth, ethics and integrity.”

SMART AND WELL RESPECTED

Meg handles her clients with the same comprehensive scope as her father. One project that has occupied some of her busy schedule is the new Time Out food hall and market planned for 916 W. Fulton St. That venture is part of *Time Out* magazine’s cultural experiences, launching in Chicago and other cities next year. The market will feature a mini-recreation of 16 top restaurants as identified by the editors of the magazine in a 50,000 square foot renovated building. In addition to the restaurants, the plan calls for three bars, a

demonstration kitchen and a retail area.

That project required a delicate touch, Meg says, because of the effort needed to preserve as much of the West Fulton Street building as possible, even though its condition had badly deteriorated. Because her clients don't cut corners to rush through a project, Meg says, project developers took down the building brick by brick and rebuilt it to be as unobtrusive and historically correct as possible.

"L3 Capital has worked with Meg for about four years on several projects throughout Chicago," says Whitney Robinette, a director of L3 Capital, a real estate investment firm and developer of 916 W. Fulton. "Meg is extremely knowledgeable about the city of Chicago land use laws and really makes an effort to work with her clients so they can understand them as well and so they can be adequately prepared to meet deadlines," Robinette says.

And, she says, Meg shares many of her father's attributes. "She is incredibly smart and well respected in her field. She makes an effort to really get to know her clients not only on a business level but on a personal level as well. She takes time to fully understand the scope of our projects in order to help us achieve our goals.

"Her attention to detail, strong communication skills, guidance and professionalism make her unique in her field. I have really enjoyed working with and getting to know Meg over the years and admire her for her genuine personality, ability to balance work and motherhood at the same time and her skill set in the land use field."

The Georges have a similar career arc. Both grew up in Chicago. While Meg did attend St. Ignatius College Prep, Jack is a Life Trustee there. Both graduated from Xavier University in Cincinnati, and both earned law degrees from DePaul College of Law. Meg, however, took a slightly more circuitous route to her final destination.

"I loved economics and art and design," she says. In fact, she graduated from Xavier with degrees in both but was drawn to law. As she pondered a career choice, she heeded advice from colleagues who told her that a transactional attorney in real estate law has much more control over a schedule than a litigator, a facet that appealed to her.

After clerking for Justice Anne Burke as a summer associate, Meg went to work for a prominent Chicago law firm. "I did public buildings, police and fire department complexes, a library and a school," she recalls, as well as sustainability projects that are LEED certified. Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design is the most widely used green building rating system in the world. Available for virtually all buildings, community and home project types, LEED

provides a framework to create healthy, highly efficient and cost-saving green buildings.

"Meg is a superb attorney who has skillfully represented our organization through various real estate-related matters ranging from environmental to land use and development," says Jason Feldman, CEO of Green Era Sustainability. "Meg guided us through a complex process of working with the city of Chicago and IL/US EPA to remediate and redevelop a brownfield site for an innovative renewable energy project."

SAME WORK ETHIC, PRINCIPLES

But Feldman says Meg also was more than just a transactional attorney. "She took a genuine interest to learn about our project and provide our team with insightful guidance and successful results. Meg has worked with us for over four years, and we know we can trust her to get the job done well. She is smart, sharp and a great legal asset. We've been lucky to have her on our team," he says.

Even among family members whose personalities and methods are compatible, working together can be awkward or, in extreme cases, uncomfortable. That issue never arose, says Jack.

"It is not awkward at all," he says. "We share the same vision of the law, the same sense of culture (at Akerman), the same method of practice. And we both seek to be properly prepared for each case we handle. We just meshed. We share the same work ethic."

Meg agrees, saying that she never felt she had to prove herself or compete in any way with her father's legendary status in Chicago.

"It's never been like that. We work together to formulate the best strategy. No one is better than my father by the way he prepares. He reads everything, every document. I emulate (his methods) and admire the way he treats people and his ethics. Everyone is treated the same, from the clients to the office staff."

"We don't work together on the same project often," Jack says, "and so she can help me with practical solutions. I respect Meg's view of a project, and I ask her advice. She made a great reputation on her own (before joining Akerman). We've never had any difficulty. We have the same ideas and the same goal — the need to solve a real estate problem."

And together or separate, the pair has solved many complex and daunting challenges, such as the development of Chicago's historic Union Station.

Riverside Investment & Development, Convexity Properties, and architecture firm Solomon Cordwell Buenz put forth initial plans to redevelop that prime site with a hotel, office and retail space and a 404-unit apartment building atop the current structure. That last item drew considerable opposition

from preservationists, neighbors and the architectural community. It was all part of the job for the Georges.

"The plan (at Union Station and adjacent property) called for 1.5 million square feet of office space, a large parking structure, a hotel and retail space," Jack says. While the structure could support the seven-story apartment building atop the iconic building, neighbors and historic preservationists were not impressed.

"There were landmark (status) issues," Meg says. "They (developers) wanted a residential development on top of the building, but at community meetings (where the plan was explained) it was clear that was not going to be acceptable to the community and, therefore, to 42nd Ward Alderman Brendan Reilly. So, that part of the plan was abandoned, and it will now just include a hotel."

The reworked plan now calls for an addition to the station's historic 1925 headhouse building—the upper levels of which will house two hotels with a total of 400 guest rooms and office space for Amtrak. Set back from the edge of the rooftop cornice, the new penthouse level will attempt to mesh with the existing building's architectural style and will not be visible from street level, planners say.

The latest proposal will create a hotel entrance on Jackson Street, add retail offerings to Clinton Street, and relocate valet operations to a space within the building. The traffic management plan was tweaked to reduce drop-offs on Adams Street, another compelling issue the Georges had to address.

Increased density at any site creates additional traffic. In a city in which the flow of traffic is already difficult to manage, adding a hotel, office space and more retail can have an incredible impact.

Meg says the Chicago Department of Transportation and a traffic engineer had to sign off on the project after ensuring that other businesses and residences in the community would not be adversely impacted and that streets and intersections could handle the anticipated increase in the volume of vehicle and pedestrian traffic.

But that was just one hurdle. Community meetings were held to address safety issues, lighting, cosmetic impacts of the buildings on the neighborhood and historic preservation concerns.

"We even had to address the geocode for Uber pickup at the site," Meg says.

Jack points out that obtaining final approval of that project, and in fact any project, depends on listening to what those most affected have to say and trying to work out any objections. In Chicago, and particularly in the Loop where there are many architecturally and historically significant structures, another layer of sensitivity to preservationist concerns is paramount.



Jack George's family at Cape Cod in 2014. From left: younger son Michael (Cushman Wakefield broker), Meg George, granddaughter Grace (now 6), Jack George, wife Mary Jo, grandson Jack (now 8), older son John (AON insurance), daughter-in-law Katie, granddaughter Sophia (now 6)

Some buildings are designated “orange buildings,” meaning they are or may be of historical significance, Jack says. “The building may have unusual or distinctive architecture. Someone who wants to develop it comes to us and we determine, for example, whom the architect was. If it is a Burnham building (after seminal Chicago architect Daniel Burnham), it might be designated as a landmark, which limits what a developer can do to the facade and the roofline.”

It is often advantageous to have a building designated with landmark status, he says, even though it limits the kind of development and rehabilitation that can occur. Parking requirements are often waived, and taxes may be reduced.

KEEPING TRACK WITH SPREADSHEETS

Any issues raised along the process are relayed to developers and architects who modify plans to address the issues before the Georges attempt to move the project forward through city committees on its way to the full city council for approval. That process can take months.

To keep track of where the process is and what needs to be accomplished, Meg says they keep a spreadsheet noting the various departments and due dates for completed work. Navigating city departments like planning, land use, preservation and others in which approval is key to success can be difficult. But Meg and Jack agree they have an excellent working relationship with everyone in those offices because they are straightforward and honest about every aspect of the plan at issue.

John O'Donnell, Chief Executive Officer of Riverside Investments and Development, has worked with Jack for more than 20 years. He says their first project together was the development of several blocks along Michigan Avenue and a few blocks to the west, a project even larger and more complex than their

redevelopment of Union Station.

“The zoning (needed) for that project was very difficult. Jack handled that for us. He handles all of our development projects in the city of Chicago.”

O'Donnell says Jack and the rest of the Akerman firm have adapted well to the changing landscape of redevelopment and its complex issues.

“Downtown is more urbanized now,” he says. “The central business district has many more residents than 25 years ago when there were no voters living downtown. Zoning then was so much easier to obtain. Now, we have to be much more sensitive. Aldermen are counting votes. We must comply with the goals of the ward.”

But O'Donnell says that is the price of doing business in a growing urban area like downtown Chicago. “That's just the process, and Jack handles all of it with a polite temperament. He has been around so long that he has access and the ear of (city officials and departments). People trust him, and that makes (the process) easier if you do what you say you are going to do. Everybody believes what he says.”

And that, says Meg, is the hallmark of their practice. “We have a good reputation for being trustworthy,” she says, “and our clients are as well. We won't represent people who aren't.

“We have to work with people in the fire department, for example, (to ensure fire service won't be impacted by a development), or ensure stormwater runoff is accounted for, or that people with disabilities can access the site. The people who review the plans we bring them trust us.”

O'Donnell says his firm has now worked with Meg on one project and that she also inspires the same trust. “She takes after Jack,” he says. “I admire the same things about her as I do Jack. I am very comfortable with her integrity as well.”

David Carlins, president of Magellan

Development, can attest to that. “Two of Jack's greatest assets as an attorney are his integrity and likeability. Since Jack has such a stellar reputation for his honesty, he commands the respect of both clients and city officials,” he says.

“This respect translates into action since everyone knows if Jack says something that it must be true,” he explains.

“Jack also has a very calming demeanor which adds to his effectiveness. He and his team are very adept at figuring out where the potential obstacles are on a given project and are very helpful in determining potential solutions. Jack has been so prolific in land use in the city of Chicago that he has just about seen every potential issue and knows how it was resolved.”

Jack's background provides him with an outstanding depth of experience. He served as a former assistant attorney general for the state of Illinois and as an assistant corporation counsel for the city of Chicago, so he knows how important that trust is.

“Our word is our bond,” he says. “We know the staff in these various departments, and we have a good relationship with them. They rely on us to tell them what is going on and to be truthful in our presentation as we seek their advice and approval. We are much more open and transparent so that when the community voices concerns, we can work with the developer to address them before going to the city council.”

TAKING TIME TO COMMUNICATE

He says it is not uncommon to spend 18 months on meetings with various city departments and community groups, making changes before proceeding to the next phase of the development approval process. Community meetings are some of the most important, the Georges say.

“The property owners get notices of proposed zoning changes and public hearings on the plans,” Meg says. “We are in direct communication with those residents.”

Jack agrees. “We handle that, not associates. If there are questions at those hearings, we answer them.”

After the issues such as traffic, stormwater runoff, compliance with the American with Disabilities Act, pedestrian safety, preservationist concerns and a myriad of other issues large and small have been addressed and plans altered, the work is not done.

Balancing all of those things is challenging, but vital, Meg says. “This is not a 9 to 5 job. Clients call us with emergencies as we get close to the hearing before the planning commission. We are constantly revising plans as we get emails from the aldermen with new issues or concerns.”

“We might be here until 10 p.m. the night before the hearing, answering emails and contacting developers to make last minute changes,” her father agrees.

In some developments, Meg says properties need to undergo an environmental assessment to determine if there is contamination that must be remediated, such as in the case of the Chicago Public Library, one of the many projects Meg shepherded to completion.

Her portfolio leans heavily to public projects and green and sustainable developments, including experience with real estate and municipal law matters including the acquisition, and sale and development of real estate, land use and zoning, licensing, permitting, subdivision, and other real estate matters. She also serves as managing partner of the Chicago office.

In her career, she assisted clients in obtaining over \$1 million in USEPA Brownfields grants and IEPA Revolving Loan Funds. She also made presentations before various zoning, planning and landmark commissions in Chicago and various suburban boards and commissions.

“Meg is a skilled zoning attorney who deeply understands the ins and outs of zoning rules, regulations and politics in Chicago,” says Shannon Donnelly, COO of the Chicago Collegiate Charter School.

“She was also so helpful to me as a layperson in making sure I knew exactly what she needed and when, and how to navigate the process. We needed to rezone a manufacturing building for general use, which can be very challenging, but Meg made everything easy for us, and we got the results we needed when we needed them.”

But her service doesn't stop there, Donnelly says. “I've had questions or required documents from her since then, and she's consistently been responsive, kind and supportive. I truly enjoy working with her and feel like she is a part of our organization's team.”

SIGNIFICANT CHICAGO DEVELOPMENTS

Jack has a long and storied career with fingerprints on many of Chicago's largest and most recognizable developments.

For 150 North Riverside Plaza, he represented Riverside Investment & Development in the approval of a 53-story office tower measuring 747 feet in height and containing approximately 1.2 million square feet of office space, 25,000 square feet of retail/restaurant space and 77 on-site parking spaces.

For 110 North Wacker Drive, he represented The Howard Hughes Corporation in the approval of a 55-story office tower with a height of 830 feet containing approximately 1.65 million square feet of office and retail space with

a 22,000 square foot landscaped river walk and a 66-foot high arcade and below-grade parking and loading. The project is estimated to exceed \$500 million.

For 444 North Dearborn/Engine Company 42 Firehouse, the firm represented Friedman Properties in a public-private partnership with the city of Chicago. Friedman is replacing a Chicago Fire Department firehouse with a brand-new state-of-the-art fire station. To do that, he entered into a redevelopment agreement with the city. The existing firehouse will be transferred to Friedman, who will then construct a new office tower in its place since the developer owns the rest of the block on which the existing firehouse sits. This was an opportunity for the developer to contribute to the city by constructing the firehouse, making a substantial monetary payment to the city, and utilizing unused development rights associated with the other buildings on the block he owns for a new proposed office tower. The project required a redevelopment agreement with the city and planned development approval.

For the Old Chicago Post Office, he represented a client to secure the entitlements

Tribune Tower, the iconic Michigan Avenue structure that once housed offices of the Chicago Tribune and WGN radio. The first phase of the more than \$1 billion project calls for 163 condominiums at Tribune Tower to be occupied in 2020. Next door they propose a 1,422-foot high-rise with 700 residences and 200 hotel rooms. Construction on the new tower is tentatively scheduled to start in 2019. Lee Golub of Golub & Co. is working closely with Jack on the deal.

“In Chicago, it's not easy to navigate (through the maze of city committees and regulations) and deal with the various aldermen,” Golub says. “Jack has great relations with every alderman we've ever had to deal with. He has a gentle way about him that allows people to like and respect him,” a quality Golub says is invaluable.

“Not only does he have all the (municipal challenges) but he also has to deal with the community. In almost any new development, people won't like it. They'll say it's the worst thing ever. People can get very aggressive in these public meetings, but Jack has a gentle way about him and is still able to get his point across. He is very disarming. I've known him for 25 years, and he's almost like a father figure to me. He respects my ideas and I respect him.”

The Georges enjoy spending time together. Jack and Mary Jo, his wife of 39 years, and children John and Michael, along with Meg and her daughter, Grace, 6, visit the family's summer home in Wisconsin and travel across the country and the world.

Meg is a serious runner, competing in the Boston Marathon and ultramarathons that can exceed the standard 26-mile run by several miles. She is also the head of the firm's wellness program and, on occasion, will bake healthy zucchini bread, avocado toast and other healthy snacks for the 90 people in the firm.

But as Chicago and particularly the Loop experience tremendous developer interest, the Georges have little in the way of spare time these days. That suits them just fine.

At the end of the day, the Georges say, while the goal is to get the project done, it is also about the process of achieving that aim.

“We work with people (in the various city of Chicago departments) who want to help us move this project forward. They never say, ‘No way,’” Jack says.

“We work with some really fantastic people in those offices. We also work with the alderman and his staff, residents and business people because we all care about the community,” Jack says.

“All we have here is our reputation, and we want to be known as people who work hard to get it done.” ■

“Meg is a skilled zoning attorney who understands the ins and outs of zoning rules, regulations and politics in Chicago.”

to renovate the property and construct three adjacent high-rise towers. This project also included negotiation of the release of an 80-year-old building restriction over the Eisenhower Expressway to create the development site, which includes 1,200 hotel rooms, 6,750 residential units, 800,000 square feet of retail space and approximately 4,500 parking spaces.

For Wanda Vista, he represented Lakeshore East LLC on a highly complex land entitlements approval process for the construction of the 1,200-foot Wanda Vista Tower in Chicago, currently under construction, with 410 condominium units and 210 hotel rooms. The work included an amendment to the existing Planned Development, an amendment to the existing Lakeshore East Master Plan, an approval under the Chicago Lakefront Protection Ordinance, the vacation and dedication of public rights of way and air rights, various easements for a new roadway system, and the expansion of Upper Wacker Drive. The total development cost is \$1 billion.

He is also working on the redevelopment of