

# JEFF STAHL

## Turning Developers' Plans into Reality

by Pat Milhizer

When he sits down with entrepreneurs who envision large residential or commercial retail projects, Jeff Stahl helps them navigate the legal terrain to make the plans happen.

"Entrepreneurs are ridiculously optimistic, or they'd never pull off some of the stuff they pull off," he says.

"They usually believe in their deal to an 'nth' degree, so we have to analyze it and find an artful way of mentioning those pieces that may not be as rose-colored as they see. But we still have to get what they're trying to get to, so that we can say 'All right, I know you love X, Y and Z. This piece is going to be a little bit of a problem; you might try this or that to get there.'"

Stahl, 53, is a partner at **Stahl, Cowen, Crowley, Addis LLC**, where he handles commercial real estate, development, finance, and corporate matters.

He represents developers in attracting investors and acquiring property. He also handles financing, structuring, building, and selling commercial real estate projects.

He's helped bring several shopping centers to life in 26 states. He's also represented home builders when they've built subdivisions in suburban areas of Chicago and parts of Wisconsin.

If you've ever been to the Harrah's casino in New Orleans, Stahl represented the company in the mid-1990s to cut through government red tape to acquire a gaming license, property, financing, and approval for the project.

On the finance side, he represents banks that lend money or borrowers who need money to buy or build commercial real estate.

With nearly 30 attorneys, Stahl's firm is a fraction of the size of large law firm. Nevertheless, the firm has gained confidence of clients.

"The only way I think we were effective in doing that and able to do what we've done to date is that we are maniacal about trying to empathize with our clients, get back to them timely, think of them constantly—even if they're not currently working with us," Stahl says.

"A number of my partners and I will see something in the paper or Internet that applies to a client and send it to them on an e-mail. It's just a constant touch because we had to. We didn't have the reputation. We didn't have

the 'Oh my gosh, if you do a project, you have to use one of these 10 known firms.' We weren't known.

"Kind of the only way we were able to make a mark in the community and be able to attract folks was to give tremendous service."

Bill Navolio, general counsel at The Leaders Bank, says one key to Stahl's success is his ability to intelligently and honestly represent clients without "being dilatory and obstructive."

"And he's done great work for me throughout my career," Navolio says. "I think he's developed one of the best firms in terms of client coverage, client reaction time. I'd never hesitate to use him."

In the year before he graduated from the University of Notre Dame in 1980, Stahl planned to pursue more schooling.

His LSAT results exceeded his GMAT score, so he applied to several law schools. In a talk with the head of the business school at Notre Dame, Stahl received some advice.

"He just said, 'Don't stay here. Go see another part of the world,'" Stahl recalls.

At the time, Texas was exploding with business.

"Real estate was being developed all over the place, and I just thought it would be the most accelerated way to get into the legal business," Stahl says.



Navolio has hired Stahl's firm to represent the bank when a large real estate project fails and money needs to be collected or the loan must be restructured.

"With his firm—the way he's brought it along—there's probably not anything that I would need that they couldn't handle. And it's a good loyal group of people; not many people come and go from his firm. I think he's had a real good knack at hiring solid young lawyers," Navolio says.

### Starting in Texas

Growing up in Morton Grove as the older of two children, Stahl helped his father clean and paint apartment buildings. His father started the Midwest branches of Century 21.

He moved to Dallas to attend what's now known as Dedman School of Law at Southern Methodist University.

He worked at a Dallas law firm handling real estate matters. But shortly after he earned a law degree in 1983, the price of oil fell. That spiked the unemployment rate and left developers with empty buildings as tenant demand dropped.

"The gig was up doing real estate," Stahl says.

Stahl returned to Chicago in 1986 to work at Shefsky & Froelich. He spent 12 years there, becoming the head of the firm's real estate group.

In 1998, he started the two-lawyer firm of Stahl & Brashler, which eventually expanded to a seven-person boutique real estate firm. Clients were looking for more help with litigation, tax

matters, and securing project investors.

“Real estate clients have other needs. We just found it incredibly difficult to hire the level of talent as quickly as we needed it,” Stahl says. “We tried, and you just don’t get the looks from accomplished practitioners to come to a small firm. So I reached out to another former partner from Shefsky and said, ‘Let’s merge.’”

In 2001, Stahl’s current firm formed with 14 lawyers.

Stahl works with clients who become friends; he recently bought a condominium in Florida with a client.

“The best part has turned out to be that I really genuinely like most of the people I represent,” he says.

Bruce Boruszak, general counsel at Pine Tree Commercial Realty, has hired Stahl to represent landlords of commercial properties—typically owners who lease space to stores for acquisition, financing and leasing.

“He brings to the table an understanding of the business side of the transaction, which is different from a lot of lawyers,” Boruszak says.

“He understands what’s important in getting a deal done and how to get a deal done—which a lot of lawyers don’t understand. They understand legal issues and they get hung up on legal issues without putting them in the perspective of the deal. You could have a major kind of legal issue that, in the grand scheme of the transaction, it isn’t that big of a deal. He’s able to understand enough of the overall transaction to put things in perspective.”

Outside of the office, Stahl is married to Trish and has four children ranging in age from 17 to 23. The family also runs the Stahl Family Charitable Foundation that donates to several charities, primarily causes that research cures for children’s diseases.

## **Finding Investors for Clients**

When talking to clients, Stahl takes the approach that gets to the bottom line.

“They don’t want to have to be told ‘no.’ They want the counsel. They want to know how it can get done,” Stahl says.

Despite the downturn in real estate deals, Stahl’s firm has increased revenue every year.

“We’ve been able to get a little bit larger slice of the smaller pie,” he says.

In 2006, the firm launched a bankruptcy group to represent lenders or borrowers when projects can’t be finished if, for example, the land price drops while the project is being developed.

“Over last three years, we did over a billion dollars a year in loan value—workouts of a commercial nature. I don’t know how big the troubled loan problem is; I don’t know if

anybody does. But if this small firm is doing over a billion dollars a year—three years in a row—the magnitude of the problem has to be just enormous,” Stahl says.

Clients also may have great development ideas, but they lack the money to make it happen. Stahl’s firm can sometimes help clients find investors.

“We try to make marriages where we can,” Stahl says. “Creativity, entrepreneurship tends to flourish in a down economy because a lot of people are out there because their jobs go away. Now you’re hungry—that fuels the need to make it work.

“There’s a lot of needs today that didn’t exist in 2005, 2006, 2007—lenders were lending money. It wasn’t as much of a service that people were looking for.

“Now, they’re looking for it. And we need to be in that business of trying to provide it where we can.” ■