

In-house Counsel

Helmer troubleshoots for Friedman

By Amanda Robert
Law Bulletin staff writer

Nicholas J. Helmer II, general counsel of Friedman Properties Ltd., challenges the idea that in-house counsel have it easier than their private-practice counterparts.

“One of the knocks from big-firm attorneys on in-house is that you don’t get to do sophisticated work,” he said. “But in the last two years, almost everything we’ve done has been sophisticated.

“I have negotiated high-rise vertical divisions, 100-year ground leases, multi-party reciprocal easement agreements and mixed-use construction projects with some of the largest companies in the country.”

Since Helmer joined Friedman Properties in August 2007, he has assisted the Chicago-based real estate company with development, preservation, management and leasing. In recent years, the company, which owns and manages more than 4 million square feet of commercial and residential space, restored properties like Medinah Temple and Tree Studios and constructed new structures like the Greenway Self Park.

Currently, Helmer helps Friedman Properties handle a new River North development that will house three separate hotels with 700 rooms.

“As general counsel, my job is not just legal work,” he said. “Every Monday, I start the week with a list of things I want to get accomplished, and by Friday, usually instead of crossing something off, the list has gotten longer.”

Helmer, with the help of assistant general counsel Erin P. Myers and one legal assistant, acts as the liaison between all of Friedman Properties’ players.

He works with the real estate brokerage subsidiary, which is responsible for the leasing activity of the entire portfolio of buildings in a 12-square-block area downtown. He assists the construction and property management groups with construction, contract, landlord/tenant and labor issues. He also oversees issues for human resources and accounting.

Helmer said that, to some extent, the buck stops with the legal department.

“Usually by the time a problem has gotten to my desk, it has been around and different departments have tried to stop it,” he said.



Nicholas J. Helmer II
General Counsel
Friedman Properties Ltd.

Headquarters: Chicago.

Size: Manages more than 4 million square feet of commercial and residential space in 50-plus properties in the Chicago area.

Law department: Two lawyers and a legal assistant.

Age: 42.

Law school: The John Marshall Law School, 1996.

Organizations: Supporter, Autism Speaks and Bear Necessities Pediatric Cancer Foundation.

Interests: Spending time with daughters, Kelly, 11, and Kate, 10; water skiing; playing golf; and cooking.

“I make a decision. If I think I have to consult with Mr. Friedman, I do.”

Myers commended her boss for organizing their department. She said he not only created

electronic files, but built better relationships with the business.

“People go to him to troubleshoot,” she said. “They trust him and can be open with him. It’s been a great lesson for me, because we don’t have that division of lawyer, business people.”

Helmer also brings insider insight and experience to his role as general counsel of Friedman Properties.

He grew up in the northwest suburbs of Chicago and started in real estate when he was 8 years old. His father, Nicholas Helmer, who co-founded Inland Real Estate Corp., taught him his earliest lessons.

“We converted an old car dealership into a banquet hall,” he said. “One of my first construction jobs was to take cinder blocks — we had knocked walls down — and chip the mortar off them, so we could reuse them.”

Helmer studied criminal justice at Indiana University and graduated in 1991. He lived in and managed a high-rise condominium conversion on East Ontario Street while he attended The John Marshall Law School.

He said the firsthand experience taught him about the day-to-day aspects of development and real estate.

“That was really a good opportunity for me, because I would work with our lawyers,” Helmer said. “I would work with the contractors. I would work with the real estate brokers. I would work with the

people coming to buy their homes.”

Helmer joined Rudnick & Wolfe, now DLA Piper, after he graduated in 1996. He said as an associate in a large firm, his first transaction wasn’t the sale of a house, but the conveyance of 140 gas stations and seven oil refineries between two companies.

He served as outside counsel to Inland Great Lakes, one of the Inland Real Estate Group of Cos. Inc., and became the company’s general counsel after he left the law firm in 2002.

Helmer joined Pinnacle, an American Management Services company and one of the largest third-party residential property managers, in 2006. He served as head of the Chicago office for the next year.

When Helmer became general counsel of Friedman Properties, his department operated without a time sheet. He said he began to quantify the value of the legal department by taking work that went to outside counsel and by creating more proactive policies.

“We had six lawsuits that were pending, generally in personal injury,” he said. “My first goal was to settle those matters as quickly as possible. My second goal was to be proactive about making sure those things didn’t happen again in the future. We now have checklists we use to inspect our own buildings.”

Helmer continues to work with outside counsel who have expertise in areas such as real estate property tax. He said he

avoids spending \$1,000 an hour on real estate matters and demands 24/7 access to his outside lawyers.

“If I have a problem, I need to be able to call you, and you need to answer the phone,” he said. “That could be after 5. That could be on Saturday. That could be on a Sunday.”

Larry N. Woodard, a shareholder at Robbins, Salomon & Patt Ltd., has assisted Helmer in his roles as both a developer and lawyer for the past 10 years. He said the general counsel’s real-world knowledge sets him apart.

“There aren’t many in-house counsel who work for developers that were developers themselves,” Woodard said. “He tells me stories about how before there were traffic count maps, he and his father would count cars on a Thursday afternoon. There’s a wealth of experience that he brings in addition to his legal expertise.”

Despite the economic downturn, Helmer said Friedman Properties continues to buy buildings, block by block.

“Our buildings are not highly leveraged, and we don’t have a lot of debt,” he said. “We look to continue that, maybe doing one acquisition a year. We are always actively looking for new joint ventures, new projects.”

Helmer, who is married and has two daughters, Kelly, 11, and Kate, 10, lives in the Arlington Heights area.