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## SPRINGFIELD DISPATCH

### O'Connell likes to keep active

Lawyer-lobbyist knows how to reach a compromise — and get things done

BY JOSH WEINHOLD  
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When John T. O'Connell walks through the Capitol, he rarely takes a direct route to his destination.

In the time it takes to get from one end of the building to another, he said he typically pauses to speak with several people about a handful of different topics.

O'Connell said he loves juggling an assortment of issues, perhaps because boredom always comes easily.

"Maybe a lot of people like to have one focus of attention," the longtime lawyer-lobbyist and former state legislator said. "But I thrive on multiple focuses of attention."

The owner of John T. O'Connell Ltd. in Western Springs handles a diverse roster of lobbying clients, ranging from entities like Ameren, Microsoft, FedEx and the Metra rail system to school groups including the University of Chicago and the Federation of Independent Illinois Colleges and Universities.

He also works as one of several lobbyists for the Chicago Cubs — even though he cheers for the Chicago White Sox in his free time.

"I'm not one of those haters," he said with a laugh. "I root for the Cubs if they're in the playoffs. I'd love to see a World Series."

Even if his mind rarely focuses on one topic, O'Connell said his career always remained centered around Springfield, thanks to a few twists of fate.

Finishing his service with the Army in 1969, O'Connell drifted through a series of odd jobs until a friend set up a meeting for him with a political consultant. That encounter led to O'Connell's hiring as

a lobbyist for the Illinois Retail Merchants Association.

The inner workings of the state political system hooked him instantly, O'Connell said. He enjoyed watching the process and the way members, including now-House Speaker Michael J. Madigan and former Senate President Thomas C. Hynes, worked on issues.

"These were people who were really impressive young lawyer-legislators," he said. "I thought, 'You know, that's something I'd really like to do.'"

O'Connell headed off to law school, seeing it as an important step on the path to elected office. After graduation, he said, he immediately began seeking a route back to the statehouse.

He lost his first campaign, but won his second time around and took office in 1981, representing a section of Chicago's western suburbs, as a Democrat.

As an elected lawmaker, O'Connell said he learned critical lessons about the importance of negotiations. It takes a lot of work to pick up a controversial issue, start with

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John T. O'Connell

Lawyer-lobbyist

- **Career:** Civic affairs manager, Illinois Retail Merchants Association, 1969-1975; government affairs staff, Walgreen Co., 1975-1979; Illinois state representative, 47th District, 1981-1989; owner, John T. O'Connell Ltd., 1979-present.
- **Age:** 68.
- **Law school:** The John Marshall School of Law, 1975.
- **Interests:** Golfing.

nothing and end up with something substantial, he said.

"I think that the essence of a lobbyist and the essence of a legislator is to be able to come to a compromise where everybody's happy," he said. "And I learned that as a legislator. I learned that from some of the best."

O'Connell said he called upon those skills in the mid-1980s when debate over tort reform grew heated, pitting doctors, hospitals and manufacturers against lawyers.

Madigan appointed O'Connell to a group tasked with developing a compromise, causing attorneys across the state to circle him as an ally due to his status as a Democrat and a lawyer.

The concerned parties descended on the capital for negotiations, O'Connell said, but he first needed to make it clear that government

doesn't work like a trial does.

"I said, 'Gentlemen, this is not the Supreme Court,' O'Connell said. "They don't operate the same way. It's not black-and-white. This is going to be a real tough time.'"

For three months, lawmakers met with both sides, reporting back to Madigan each night. Eventually, they produced the Tort Reform Act of 1986 — a deal that couldn't be considered a win or loss for anybody, O'Connell said, but legislation everyone could live with.

During O'Connell's time in office, though, his law practice grew. After a few terms, the married father of two children said he began to think about stepping aside and focusing on those efforts.

He survived one re-election vote with that mentality, but not a second one, suffering defeat in 1988.

"That was the best thing that ever happened to me," he said, "although I didn't realize it at the time."

After the loss, he began lobbying again and devoted more attention to his work as legal counsel to the west suburban village of Hodgkins, a position he began in 1981.

Working on commercial and industrial development for the town brought up many of the issues he dealt with as a legislator, including bonding, annexations and tax increment financing districts.

Hodgkins Mayor Noel Cummings, who hired O'Connell soon after he took office, said the attorney functioned as his "top engineer" and his "right-hand man" during the village's major commercial growth period.

Cummings said he instantly trusted O'Connell due to his commitment to faith and family, despite their shared civic inexperience when he offered him the job.

"He said, 'I don't know that much about municipal law,'" Cummings said. "I said, 'I don't know that much about being the mayor, either. We'll learn together.'"

Robert S. Molaro, himself a lawyer-lobbyist and former legislator, said O'Connell's knowledge and experience contribute to his success, but his other personal qualities make a bigger impact on his work.

"When John gives his word on something, you can go to the bank on it," Molaro said. "That's rare nowadays. It used to be the rule, now it's the exception."

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