

Hospitality MVP: Latham & Watkins' Gary E. Axelrod

By Joyce Hanson

Law360 (November 22, 2019, 4:26 PM EST) -- Gary E. Axelrod of Latham & Watkins LLP led Walton Street Capital in the acquisition of the Hyatt Minneapolis, represented Highgate Hospitality in multiple recent deals and guided Loews Hotels on a development in St. Louis' Ballpark Village, making him one of Law360's 2019 Hospitality MVPs.

HIS NOTABLE DEALS OF THE LAST YEAR:

As a partner in Latham's real estate group as well as co-chair of the hospitality, gaming and leisure industry group, Axelrod took on many high-stakes transactions and represented big names among real estate investment trusts, private equity sponsors and funds, institutional investors, operating companies and entrepreneurial developers.

Axelrod pointed to his representation of Chicago-based real estate investment firm Walton Street Capital when forming a joint venture of Walton Street Capital LLC and Haberhill LLC related to the recapitalization and acquisition of the Hyatt Minneapolis.

He also advised REIT Highgate Hospitality in multiple deals, including the company's acquisition of three hotels — Park Central New York, WestHouse Hotel New York and The Park Central San Francisco — from REIT Pebblebrook Hotel Trust.

In addition, he guided Loews Hotels & Co. in its development of Live! by Loews – St. Louis, a hotel partnership between Loews, The Cordish Cos. and the St. Louis Cardinals. The hotel is slated to open in the spring of 2020 and will be part of the \$260 million Ballpark Village expansion project near Busch Stadium.

"Given that it's been a very strong market for so long, the real value creation is doing deals that are complicated that others won't be willing to take on and to make investments in areas that require a little bit more active, on-the-ground attention," according to Axelrod, who has been tapped several times as a Law360 Hospitality MVP, most recently in 2016.

The logo consists of the letters 'MVP' in a blue, serif font. A red circle is drawn around the 'V', with a red arrow pointing upwards from the top of the circle.

Gary E. Axelrod
Latham & Watkins

The Live! by Loews development deal in St. Louis is a great example of that kind of value creation, he said.

"You're not buying a stabilized asset," he said. "You're taking a little bit of a chance on the St. Louis market, which you wouldn't necessarily think of as a destination. But you're partnering with the right partners in Cordish and the St. Louis Cardinals in an area that is taking on a life similar to what the Cubs have done in Wrigleyville in Chicago."

WHY HE'S A HOSPITALITY ATTORNEY:

Axelrod said that in his practice as a real estate private equity lawyer who primarily represents real estate investment funds, he counts himself as fortunate that many of his longtime clients have a strong interest in hospitality.

His many relationships in the hospitality industry have led Axelrod to develop a strong interest in the space. He said hospitality is his favorite asset class because he likes the combination of the complexity, the associated cachet, the personalities involved and the diverse practice areas that get involved.

Looking at the complexities of the Highgate Hospitality acquisition of three hotels, for example, Axelrod spoke of staying up all night "to make sure that everything was ticked and tied, all the i's dotted and the t's crossed," before the merger was completed when the market opened first thing in the morning of the closing.

"We negotiated separate financing packages for each hotel, separate joint venture agreements, and we did it all under the umbrella of a much larger public deal that was not conditioned on our closing but was a critical element of the public deal. I'm very proud of that transaction and the entire team."

WHAT MADE HIM PROUD THIS YEAR:

Axelrod said that overall, his proudest achievement of the year is having helped Latham build a strong hospitality, gaming and leisure team. The team's attorneys have scaled their practice and "provide top quality for sophisticated clients who expect the very best in the fastest possible way," he said.

He credits the legal work of members of the real estate practice in the Chicago office, including partner Rachel Bates and new recruit Bob Fernandez, formerly a U.S. real estate group chair at Dentons. Axelrod said he also values the contributions of associates Sarah Barr, Laura Janowitsch, John Jefferson, Zonia Medina, Dustin Paige, John Riordan and Nicole Stauffer.

"Everyone on the team has been up to the challenge without missing a beat and I am routinely complimented by clients and opposing counsel alike on what a great team we have," Axelrod said.

WHAT MOTIVATES HIM:

Axelrod said he enjoys providing clients with services that make them feel that he's a critical element of their decision-making, strategy and overall investment goals. What motivates him is his ability to respond — quickly — when clients seek his advice and counsel.

"What's unique about all of these deals is not only the size and complexity but also the time frame," he said. "Especially in this day and age, every deal is always on a super tight time frame. Deadlines are yesterday or three weeks ago."

HIS ADVICE FOR JUNIOR ATTORNEYS:

A successful career in law depends on much more than billable hours and bonuses, Axelrod said. He urged junior attorneys to focus on their relationships, and not just the hours they're putting in.

"Work the relationships. Work the industry and work to increase your knowledge, even if it is outside your comfort zone," Axelrod said. "Try to learn and understand why certain things are done a certain way or why clients care about certain things. It's not just a law school exam. It's real life. Having that confidence allows you to say yes or no, but it requires you to be more invested in the career than just billing eight hours every day."

— *As told to Joyce Hanson*

Law360's MVPs are attorneys who have distinguished themselves from their peers over the past year through high-stakes litigation, record-breaking deals and complex global matters. A team of Law360 editors selected the 2019 MVP winners after reviewing nearly 900 submissions.