

A portrait of Greg Sgro, a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and red tie. He is smiling and standing in front of a staircase with a wooden handrail. A Christmas tree is visible in the background.

GREG SGRO

Living and Practicing Real Estate Law in Central Illinois

by Elizabeth Davies

SPRINGFIELD—Gregory I. Sgro has been going to real estate closings since he was a child.

He was sweeping up new-construction sawdust as soon as he was old enough to hold a broom. He grew up alongside zoning clerks and title company employees, literally learning the business from the inside out.

As newlyweds, Sgro and his wife spent their weekends showing apartments. They've shown hundreds over the years. And in his early days out of law school, Sgro embarked on developing his very first subdivision—the first, it turned out, of many in the years to come.

Indeed, Sgro's legal experience at **Sgro Hanrahan Durr & Rabin LLP** has been supplemented by a deep working knowledge of the real estate industry.

"I understand what the client wants from me, because I've been through the process myself," he says. "Sometimes, the client knows what it wants to accomplish but not the steps to get there."

Today, the 52-year-old attorney balances a law practice that focuses on wills, trusts, probate, redevelopment and civil litigation with a concurrent career of developing subdivisions. He has developed more than 500 acres since graduating from law school in 1986, with projects both ongoing and upcoming.

Meredith Branham has known Sgro for nearly 20 years because of his job as the public works director, zoning and land subdivision director and the building code administrator for the nearby Village of Chatham, a community of 13,000. There, Sgro started a subdivision in 1994 and has ongoing development interests.

"We have worked very closely on many aspects of his developments," says Branham, who is most impressed with Sgro's honesty. "He is a man of his word. Any deals that the village and he agreed on were fulfilled. Mr. Sgro still believes that a handshake is a binding commitment."

Learning from the Ground Up

Sgro grew up in a home where both parents worked in real estate, with his father focused on residential housing. In fact, his father built the first condominiums in Springfield in the 1970s. Sgro went along on those business deals, learning about the industry as he grew.

"I became familiar with the process of seeing a piece of property, envisioning what could be

done with it and turning it into a reality,” he says. “At one point, I realized that having a legal education would be very helpful.”

In the eighth grade, Sgro researched boarding schools and then asked his parents if he could go away to school as a means to further his education.

“Springfield High had split shifts because there were too many students at the time,” he says. “Split shifts were a good way to handle a large number of students, but perhaps they were not best for the student.”

Instead, he attended Chaminade College Prep in St. Louis. There, he became involved with the debate team and had the chance to travel regionally for competitions. Even today, he speaks in an even, passionate tone. It was a natural fit for him to pursue law school and the courtroom.

He went on to graduate from Northwestern University with a bachelor of science degree and obtained his law degree from Washington University.

He returned to Springfield in 1986 for his first job out of law school. Within six months, however, the firm broke apart and he found himself embarking on a career as a sole practitioner.

“I had quite a surprise,” he recalls.

Still, the contacts Sgro had made in his early years proved to be helpful.

“This is the city I was born in. Though I had gone away to school, I knew a lot of people in Springfield, so I had no lack of work,” he says.

Like any new attorney, Sgro started by taking any case that came his way. But as his career grew, he eliminated fields that he didn’t enjoy. First was criminal law. Then family law.

“Criminal defense was an area I found challenging and fun,” he says. “The time spent in court was rewarding. But the higher paying cases tended to involve charges of a serious nature and people whose lives hung in the balance of the outcome of that case.”

That, combined with the development work he had started on the side, sealed his decision to stick with civil law. In his off-hours, he was helping his family manage properties, finish closings and handle evictions.

Then he came across his first opportunity to develop a property on his own. His first subdivision was one that had failed and been taken back by the bank with only 24 of the 80 lots finished.

“Initially, my job was to get the permits to complete the subdivision, put in the streets and infrastructure and sell the lots,” he says. “I did, and I liked it so I did it again. Then I decided I would do it as long as the market supported it.”

It turned out that the real estate market stayed strong for about two decades. He has developed

about 500 acres under several different company names that were designed to allow for better oversight and accounting of the various projects.

“Since 2009, the environment has cooled, but it’s still there,” he says.

Today, Sgro’s new construction houses average \$213,000 for a three-bedroom, two-bath home between 1,800 and 2,000 square feet. He appreciates Springfield’s affordable housing market, and he tries to build houses that a family can truly call a home.

“I have deliberately put my subdivisions next to schools so young families can find a home where their children can walk to school,” he says.

Sgro lives in a house he developed as well. It is on a piece of property that he had re-parceled for use on Lake Springfield. Sgro and the college sweetheart he married built the home in 1989. They have raised three children there. Today, it houses his collection of Midwest regionalist art and includes a garage where he is currently restoring a 1963 Corvette.

His children, meanwhile, have moved on to college. His youngest son is a sophomore at Butler University. His middle child, a daughter, is a singer and songwriter pursuing a graduate

“I understand what the client wants from me, because I’ve been through the process myself,”

degree at Lindenwood University. His oldest son is in his third year of law school at St. Louis University Law School and is doing an internship with a state’s attorney’s office.

“He would like to spend some time following his own career path, but we’ve spoken about the possibility of him one day returning to Springfield,” Sgro says.

“I’ve been careful not to offer too much guidance. The most generic question arose when we discussed whether he should go to law school. My answer at that time was, ‘If the law interests you, you should pursue it regardless of the job market. You will find work in the field if you are interested in it and good at it.’”

Balancing Sgro’s Two Careers

For the most part, dual careers in law and real estate have been beneficial for Sgro.

“They provide a very nice counterbalance for my day,” he says. “I have something very tangible with real estate to correspond with the less tangible part of a law practice. Often, in the law, success can’t be seen. It can only be achieved. With real estate, there are visible results.”

It also can be challenging.

“Each of the two professions can be very busy and, on occasion, they are both busy at the same time. When one is strong and the other is not as demanding, it works out well.”

There have been times, however, when Sgro has declined to take on cases that would cause him to go up against someone he works with in the development world.

“Springfield is a small enough community that those conflicts are generally seen coming,” he says.

For the most part, Sgro’s days are spent with legal work, while he focuses on development during evenings and weekends. Looking ahead, he expects to begin a foray into commercial development soon.

“I believe the market for commercial development, particularly in Chatham, is emerging,” he says. “I think it’s a good next step for my career, because it provides new challenges and new things to learn.”

At his firm, Sgro represents two of the largest contractors in the Springfield community, along with a number of smaller contractors and commercial developers. Over the years, he has represented both landlords and tenants. He brings great value to his real estate clients with the depth of his local contacts. He knows engineers, government officials, contractors and even office clerks. While it doesn’t guarantee that a project will go smoothly, “knowing those people will enable me to help you get the best result possible,” he says.

Sam Nichols, the owner of NAI True Commercial Real Estate Services, met Sgro professionally through a mutual client about 15 years ago. He was impressed at how Sgro could complete a transaction quickly and cost effectively.

“Due to his gentleman’s way of doing his work, he was a man I wanted to know better,” Nichols says. “Greg’s experience and understanding of commercial and residential real estate has brought efficiency to every transaction we have worked on together.”

Nichols is comfortable referring Sgro to his customers. He says they come to enjoy his work as well.

“He is fair, honest and expeditious in getting his work done,” Nichols says.

E.L. Pruitt Co., a mechanical contractor, has been a client of Sgro for about 10 years, primarily in real estate dealings. President and Chief Executive Officer John P. Pruitt says he appreciates Sgro’s accessibility and speed in completing projects.

“He is very prompt, he gets right on it, gets it done, and it’s correct,” Pruitt says. “He’s a great attorney and a good guy.”

Skillful in Many Practice Areas

Sgro says his practice was helped early on when he learned to resist giving quick answers. Instead, he would think on an issue first so he could give a better answer. He also knows that the best attorneys have qualities beyond their legal knowledge.

“A good attorney must be a good listener,” he says. “A good attorney must understand what the client should achieve. A good attorney shares the client’s feelings, rather than the attorney’s own feelings. A good attorney considers the client’s budget. A good attorney thinks before he or she acts.”

Despite his industry knowledge, some of Sgro’s biggest cases have not been related to real estate.

In 1991, he secured a federal verdict against Sangamon County for failing to provide medical treatment for a psychiatric inmate who died in jail. It was, Sgro says, a sad story of a mentally ill man who had not been convicted of a crime.

“It was a case I didn’t relish taking, but couldn’t turn away from because I felt a bond with the family,” he says.

Sgro currently has a case, *Reynolds v. Jimmy John’s*, pending in circuit court. It stems from a traffic accident involving a motorcyclist and a Jimmy John’s driver who was making a delivery. The sandwich chain advertises “freaky fast delivery.”

“When you undertake providing fast delivery, you also should undertake an additional responsibility to do it safely,” Sgro says.

Sgro argued the case successfully before the 4th District Court of Appeals and won the ability to proceed with the case in circuit court.

Enjoying a Rewarding Career

Despite his success in the courtroom, Sgro expects to begin moving his practice away from litigation and more toward transactional work in the future.

“I find that litigation stays with me when I go home at night,” he says.

As his practice shifts, he intends to remain involved in his hometown community. In the past, he has had connections with both Big Brothers/Big Sisters and the Sangamon State University Foundation. He helped create the Springfield Parks Foundation.

They were ways to give back to a city he loves.

“Springfield is a small community without being a small town,” he says. “There are a lot of personal connections here that help you be a part of what’s going on.”

Sgro planted his law office in the heart of Springfield, in a renovated mansion that once was the home of Brigadier General Isham Haynie. He was appointed general by President Lincoln.

“The building dates back to the 1850s, and it



is thought that Lincoln was here due to his close relationship with Haynie,” says Sgro, who has been in that office since 1989.

It’s in that updated mansion, with its stately two-story pillars out front, where clients meet Sgro. It’s where they make business deals that they hope will change their lives for the better. That’s where they plan their wills, manage their estates and seek advice when they don’t know where else to turn.

In mid-2013, Sgro represented a widow who had unexpectedly lost her husband of 47 years. She was not well-versed in the couple’s finances, so Sgro spent a good deal of time directing her in financial matters. It wasn’t so much the job of an attorney to do that. It was simply a kindness.

He gave her resources and references to people who could help her take control of her finances.

A week before Christmas, she showed up in the firm’s front lobby and asked to see Sgro. He came out of his office to find her decked out for Christmas, from a holiday sweater on her shoulders to jingle bells hanging from her ears.

Stepping forward, she said, “I just came to give you a hug and wish you a merry Christmas.”

That’s why Sgro loves his job.

“Those are the rewards that keep me coming back to the law,” he says, “the fact that I’ve connected with someone.” ■