



Tom Green

Making Municipal Growth Happen

by Elizabeth Davies

ROCKFORD — Just 20 years ago, you could leave downtown Rockford and be surrounded by farm fields a few miles to the north.

Today, that same corridor is ripe with commercial buildings. You'll find a Kohl's store, Chili's, Pier 1 and Lowe's among a myriad of smaller merchants. Roads have been expanded, and new housing developments have popped up.

Mayors, trustees and builders have come and gone. One guy has been there through it all: Thomas A. Green.

From his Rockford office at **Barrick, Switzer, Long, Balsley & Van Evera, LLP**, Green has been the village attorney for fast-growing Machesney Park since 1991. He played a critical role in helping the village annex 1,400 acres of farmland that proved to be key in developing a tax base in the years to come.

He also watched Machesney Park's strip of Illinois 173 go from a sleepy back road

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to the fastest-growing corridor in the state.

To say it's been a rewarding journey is an understatement. "I have some sweat equity in Machesney Park," Green says. "It wasn't just me, but I certainly did my part."

Green isn't done. He is helping the village as it redirects efforts for development elsewhere, still looking ahead for growth plans in the future. He says Barrick Switzer is a good place for helping him do that, with its strong base in municipal law and its effective approach to addressing client needs.

"We are a result-oriented law firm," he says. "This was engrained in me the day I interviewed. When a client comes in, they are at Point A in their problem. We need to get to them to Point B in the best, most economical and most effective way. It's a simple approach to solving problems."

Sunil Puri, president of First Midwest Group, has been a primary developer in the 173 corridor. He admires Green's abilities and drive.

"He's most interested in advocating a result for his client, rather than just showing his legal prowess," Puri says. "He has the unique ability to make sure his client is well represented, but he knows there is no win if there's no deal in the end."

Practicing Law in His Hometown

The son of a doctor and a school teacher, Green grew up a Rockford native. He appreciated the city's park system and friendly atmosphere. While he left to attend the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, he chose the NIU College of Law because of its proximity to Rockford. "I wanted to take advantage of my local ties," he says.

Green spent a year as a law clerk in Rockford's bankruptcy court, where he got to know established Barrick Switzer bankruptcy lawyers Stephen Balsley and James Stevens. The pair invited him to join their practice, which had helped to incorporate the village of Machesney Park just four years earlier.

"I joined the firm in 1985, having no clue I would do a significant amount of municipal work," he says. Hired to handle bankruptcy cases, Green quickly got his feet wet in other areas.

"In addition to bankruptcy work, I was yanked into municipal work, so I started doing traffic prosecution, DUIs, zoning, land use enforcement and code enforcement," he says.

By 1991, he had been shadowing Machesney Park attorney and Barrick Switzer partner Joe Long for nearly two years. He knew the people, the issues and the solutions. Long stepped down from his role, and Green moved in.

"If you're a municipal lawyer, you're committing to night meetings all the time," he says. "You have to get used to that, and your family has to get used to that."

Making Mark on Machesney Park

Not long after, Machesney Park leaders began making decisions that would move them closer to their vision of having a booming commercial corridor. They wanted purposeful growth on an eight-mile stretch of Illinois 173, running from Illinois 251 out to the interstate.

"There was a desire at the time to expand to I-90," he says. "It was viewed as a growth corridor."

That was very forward-thinking, since retail development wouldn't begin for another decade. But Green was right in the thick of things as the process started. They approached the farmers who were land owners in that area, offering sewer and water access that would increase their property values. At the time, neighboring city Loves Park was battling for the same land, but Machesney Park was able to strike the deal first.

It took 27 drafts of the annexation agreement before Machesney Park secured the extension they were looking for, going clear out to the interstate. They followed that move by establishing a TIF district for the area. Retailers quickly swarmed in and "the tax income out there went from \$80,000 to \$800,000," Green says.

At present, the two-lane road is being expanded to four lanes, and up to six lanes in parts. An interchange at I-90 has now been added, some 20 years after efforts began to put one there.

"When I started in Machesney Park in 1991, (the interchange) was five years out," Green recalls. "We kept saying it was five years out for the next 20 years."

The village, the largest that Barrick Switzer represents at 25,000 residents, is a unique municipality to work with. Despite its size, it has only about a dozen full-time staff. The police force and street crews are outsourced. That keeps overhead low, with tax revenues continuing to rise.

"Tom totally understands his client's needs and parameters, and then achieves whatever they are trying to do," Puri says. "He has always professed the best interest of the community, while working with each of the different mayors."

There have been about five mayors in Machesney Park while Green has worked there. Green says a challenge in his role is staying neutral and out of politics, offering impartial advice without appearing to take sides.

"It's important that you constantly walk the fairness line and that you're honest in

all your decisions," he says.

Tim Savage, who became Machesney Park's village administrator three years ago, noted Green's ability to do that right away.

"I've always had a level of confidence in him because I know he is looking out for the best interest of the village," he says. "He comes to the table with a solution in mind. He brings the perspective of trying to work toward the best outcome, rather than simply drawing a line in the sand."

Looking Ahead

After a year of negotiations and challenges, Machesney Park was successful in wooing corporate grocer Meijer to its 173 corridor. Scheduled to open in 2015, the store is a boon to the area and a testament to Green's tenacity.

"I had to keep a spreadsheet of all the agreements with Meijer and what the status of each was. It was that complicated," Green says. "But it's those projects that you look back at and say, 'We took a very difficult process and made it work.'"

Puri was the developer of the Meijer project. He says Green has exuded professionalism on that and other projects.

"I have never felt overwhelmed, embarrassed, or guilty to bring up any idea to Tom," Puri says. "Not always do they work, but I don't feel belittled for bringing it up."

With the success of 173 under its belt, Machesney leaders have been inspired to set their focus elsewhere: on the redevelopment of the former Machesney Park Mall. Previously a popular shopping spot, it has become mostly barren in recent years. Now in a TIF district, the mall is home to a large employer in what once was a Kohl's store. Medical software company Practice Velocity initially was considering leaving town in search of a larger space.

"They originally dismissed Machesney Park without really looking at it," Green says. "We reached out to them and asked them to take a closer look."

The man leading that hunt happened to be Green's brother-in-law, fellow Rockford lawyer James Keeling.

"Tom, as municipal attorney for the Village of Machesney Park, had a vision for the repurposing of the western half of the former Machesney Park Mall," Keeling recalls. "He contacted our office and advocated for the site...He led an expedited process — we called it 'warp speed' — that resulted in a major economic development win for the software company as well as his client."

"There are now 300 employed here who could have easily relocated to Wisconsin."

Village administrator Savage credits Green for going above and beyond to relocate

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Practice Velocity. “Through his contacts and power of persuasion, he got them back,” Savage says. “That was a fantastic save, and he was a key part of that.”

Keeling says Green is a stand-out in his role as village attorney because of his ability to get opposing parties working together.

“Tom has strong networking skills,” Keeling says. “He has the opportunity to work with clients of diverse backgrounds and perspectives, but does so on a personal basis that works toward consensus and common ground whenever possible.”

While Machesney Park reflects a heavy amount of Green’s day-to-day work — and the 173 corridor is clearly a common thread weaving through the past 20 years — he also takes on clients in other areas. He has been involved in corporate sales, manufacturing issues, real estate work, collections and banking. In fact, his knowledge of banking from the municipal side has made him an asset to banks who want him to represent them in working with other municipalities.

Off the clock, Green enjoys golf and travel. He’s seen his fair share of the inside of hockey rinks, having had two boys play competitive hockey. Both sons remain in the Rockford area. Dave works for the Rockford Park District, while AJ works for the YMCA of the Rock River Valley.

His daughter Teddy, a competitive high school and college hip-hop dancer, is in her first year of working as a lawyer for the state’s attorney’s office in Rockford.

A former All-American swimmer, Green makes a point to do CrossFit a few times a week. “If I have to get old, I’m going to be fit doing it,” he laughs.

And lest it seem as though Green only left his mark in Machesney Park, he has volunteered his talents in Rockford as well. He is a former board member at the Harlem Community Center, where he helped develop a skate park for area kids. He currently serves on boards for the Rockford Area Economic Development Council and Keep Northern Illinois Clean and Beautiful.

It’s part of continuing to grow and improve his hometown — a place with its share of struggles, but with potential as well. Indeed, Green has used his legal career to further the work done in his community and to move it forward.

Nowhere is that more evident than on that now-bustling stretch of Illinois 173.

“He might as well be an economic development specialist, rather than just a lawyer,” Puri says. “He has a passion. He’s like a kid who got a Monopoly game called ‘Machesney Park.’” ■