

WNY law firm's reach extends to development project in Hawaii

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For 15 years, Cannon Heyman & Weiss LLP has provided legal assistance in federal tax and securities. The law firm generally follows its developer clients wherever they build and that clientele has become more widespread. A number of these projects have expanded throughout the country.

It wasn't until more recently, though, that Steven Weiss, one of the firm's three founders, took on what became his most interesting and far-reaching project to date.



Steven Weiss of Cannon Heyman & Weiss was in Honolulu last month for the... [more](#)

Last month, the Buffalo attorney was in Honolulu for a groundbreaking of a mixed-use arts development that blends living and work space for artists and their families, nonprofits and for community events and gatherings. He worked on the legal side of the deal for his client, Artspace Projects Inc., a Minneapolis nonprofit that develops affordable space to meet the needs of artists through adaptive reuse of historic buildings and new construction.

While Cannon Heyman representatives are traveling farther for deals these days, thanks to its niche work in affordable housing and community development law, Weiss said those efforts have generated more for the local community, as well.

Since his firm works with local counsel on many projects, it opens the door to opportunities for collaboration with lawyers around the country. That, in turn, creates opportunities to bring work back to Western New York, he said.

“I might have hoped for it but it would have been hard to plan for all of this or anticipate the growth of the firm and where that has taken us,” Weiss said.

He runs the firm along with Steven Heyman and [Geoffrey Cannon](#), both of whom work in the Albany office.

[Cannon Heyman Weiss](#) recently became general counsel for Artspace, which a decade ago completed an affordable housing project for artists in Buffalo by redeveloping the historic Buffalo Electric Vehicle Co. factory at 1219 Main St. into lofts.

The \$17.6 million Buffalo project includes 36 units in the former factory; 24 units in six newly constructed “fourplexes” built on vacant land behind the factory; commercial space on the main floor of the building; and a two-level community gallery, which is managed by the property’s resident artists.

Cannon Heyman worked with Artspace for years while another law firm had the lion’s share of its work. Weiss said his firm first hooked up with Artspace when the nonprofit was considering a project in Poughkeepsie and then helped with two projects in New York City.

Last year, Artspace decided to give [Cannon Heyman Weiss](#) all of its legal work, including a tax credit transaction on the island of Oahu for a project called Ola Ka ‘Ilima Artspace Lofts.

Weiss was admitted to practice law in Minnesota to help handle the work that comes with representing Artspace, which closed 40 deals in 25 years in places around the country. He’s been to Minneapolis numerous times to attend board meetings, draft resolutions and gather information that helps in coordinating work with local firms there that will have to be hired on each project.

“They didn’t want us to be only representing them from a distance and not be able to attend their board meetings and draft resolutions and opinions,” he said.

At sunrise on Jan. 29 in the Kaka’ako neighborhood of Honolulu, he experienced his first “ground blessing.” It was a Polynesian new moon ceremony corresponding with the Chinese New Year and full moon for the soon-to-be built affordable housing project for artists by Artspace, with the help of a Hawaiian partner, PA’I, a nonprofit dedicated to preserving native culture. The ceremony included Polynesian dancing and prayers.

“It was a very meaningful experience. I like to go to our groundbreaking and ribbon

cuttings just to meet people associated with the project, but this was very neat given the location,” said Weiss.

The farthest he had traveled for work before this was California.

The \$53 million project in a transitional neighborhood of light industrial property between the downtown business district and Waikiki Beach will include 84 units of affordable living and work space. There also will be 10,000 square feet of greenspace and more than 7,000 square feet of community and commercial space for arts-related businesses.

The ground floor will be home to the PA’I Arts & Culture Center for Hawaiian dancers, musicians, visual artists, cultural practitioners and others interested in experiencing native Hawaiian traditions.

According to Weiss, another aspect of the Artspace work is to create and sustain housing affordability. This type of work also allows for redevelopment of adjacent properties without losing the artists from the community.

Artspace’s project in Buffalo is a good example of that, as there has been redevelopment around the lofts.

“That’s a unique aspect of their work,” he said.

The pipeline of Artspace’s current deals will take it to Puerto Rico and possibly Alaska. And for Weiss and other members of the firm, that means getting used to more work travel.

Michael Petro is editor and reporter for the Buffalo Law Journal