

Hospitality MVP: Sheppard Mullin's Larry Eppley

By Joyce Hanson

Law360, New York (December 12, 2016, 3:38 PM EST) -- Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton LLP partner Larry Eppley has nabbed a spot on Law360's 2016 list of Hospitality MVPs thanks to his work in acquisitions, real estate finance, joint ventures, and other public and private transactions in the industry, particularly for two standout clients.

Eppley's work for real estate investment firm Oxford Capital Group LLC and private equity shop Geolo Capital has been extensive in 2015 and 2016, including his representation of Oxford in its \$315 million sale of the LondonHouse Chicago to a subsidiary of German investment fund Union Investment.

The LondonHouse transaction set a record price for a Chicago hotel property, according to Sheppard Mullin. The property is Oxford's latest luxury hotel development, with 452 rooms in the renovated landmark London Guarantee & Accident building at the iconic corner of North Michigan Avenue and Wacker Drive. The transaction closed on April 15, 2016, and included a long-term lease of the property from Union by an Oxford-led joint venture tenant entity.

"LondonHouse was sold just before it opened at the highest per-key price ever of any hotel in Chicago," said Eppley, a partner in Sheppard Mullin's corporate practice group in Chicago, where he is also the office managing partner.

Other Oxford transactions Eppley negotiated were the formation of a joint venture with Fir Tree Partners and guidance of the JV in its \$34.7 million acquisition of the Bay Harbor Hotel and Conference Center in Tampa, Florida, and a joint venture comprising an Oxford entity and a Quadrum Global entity in the \$20 million purchase of a stalled hotel project property located at 168 N. Michigan Ave. in Chicago.

Meanwhile, he has assisted Geolo Capital, a firm founded by billionaire John A. Pritzker of the Pritzker family dynasty that is responsible for founding the Hyatt hotel chain, with selling the PE group's 49.9 percent interest in the luxury resort Carmel Valley Ranch in California to Wanxiang America Real Estate Group for \$49.9 million.



And Eppley also represented the Geolo Capital Partners II LP fund in the formation of a joint venture to acquire the Talbott Hotel in Chicago, and he represented Geolo for a joint venture with Wanxiang and their subsequent financing of a \$50 million mortgage loan for the acquisition and renovation of the Ventana Inn & Spa in Big Sur, California.

Eppley had been named a Hospitality MVP in 2013 too, for his work in major transactions geared toward hotel development — he was also cited then as counsel to Oxford. His experience extends to middle-market and emerging-growth companies, including those in the hospitality and restaurant sectors.

He has three degrees from the University of Illinois, where he received a bachelor's in accounting, a master's in accounting and a law degree. When he got out of law school, he worked at what he describes as a "high pedigree" Chicago regional law firm, Bell Boyd & Lloyd LLP.

During his time there, Eppley took a 2005-2006 hiatus to serve as general counsel to Potbelly Sandwich Works LLC, a fast-growing Chicago restaurant chain. He said he now brings his experience from that period to the Sheppard Mullin clients he serves as principal outside legal counsel.

"I've been a private practice lawyer my whole career, but for two years I was GC at Potbelly," Eppley said. "That entrepreneurial experience was great. It was interesting to be in-house, and I hope it has made me a better outside counsel to clients. What I learned is that as a lawyer, law may be your business, but it's not your client's business."

After Bell Boyd merged with global law firm K&L Gates LLP in 2009, Eppley and four other Bell Boyd lawyers plus a Winston & Strawn LLP lawyer in 2012 made the move to Sheppard Mullin, which had offices on the East and West coasts and was looking to establish a Chicago base, he said.

Today, 60 to 70 percent of Eppley's practice is focused on the hospitality industry, due in large part to the relationships he's developed along the way, including his business dealings with his longtime friends from Oxford, who back in the 1990s asked him to help them with their first-ever hotel project.

"As is the case with a lot of lawyers, it happens," Eppley said. "One day you wake up, and it's a niche practice and a successful way of proceeding."

--Editing by Edrienne Su.