

Illinois Powerhouse: Mayer Brown

By **Celeste Bott**

Law360 (August 3, 2021, 2:02 PM EDT) -- Mayer Brown LLP's longstanding work for the city of Chicago, including defending attempts to block construction of former President Barack Obama's presidential center and its work on public corruption and hot-button state political issues, landed it a spot among Law360's 2021 Illinois Powerhouses.

When Mayer Brown partner Michael Scodro reflects on the firm's win for the city of Chicago in litigation seeking to block the Obama Center on the city's South Side, he says it's likely the only time he's shown up for argument to find every seat of the courtroom taken.

"Members of the public were sitting at the counsel table with me and my colleagues," he recalled.

But representing the city of Chicago in high-profile disputes is nothing new for Mayer Brown. The firm's roots are deep in Chicago, where it was founded in 1881, and it was Mayer Brown's Windy City office that advised on the original incorporations of Sears and Continental Bank and counseled city leaders through the growth of Chicago's airport and the leasing of the Chicago Skyway, the first privatization of an American toll road, according to the firm.

The global firm reports more than 380 attorneys working in Illinois alone, with nearly a thousand in the U.S.

Its longstanding partnership with Chicago is "part of the firm's DNA," Scodro says, illustrated in part by the fact that Mayor Lori Lightfoot is a former firm partner.

"I think there's a real sense of energy and pride surrounding that work," said Scodro, who is a member of the firm's Supreme Court and appellate practice.

For the Obama Center, which has been planned for the Chicago's Jackson Park and challenged by environmental groups, Mayer Brown attorneys helped secure the initial win in the district court and assisted city attorneys with the appeal. Chicago prevailed in the Seventh Circuit in August 2020.

Government work continues to be a growing area and an emphasis for the firm, which has a dedicated government practice of about 15 lawyers in Chicago, Mitch Holzrichter, a partner in the government transactions and infrastructure investment practices of the Chicago office, told Law360.



But there's upwards of 50-100 lawyers, and really, the Chicago office as a whole that engages on these kinds of issues and contributes to cases in this space, Holzrichter said.

Scodro said that because so many members of the firm work regularly with the government group, it's led to a "terrific relationship" that allows Mayer Brown to provide full service to clients.

The firm has long represented Republican leaders in redistricting and currently represents the Illinois House Republican leaders in litigation challenging the legislative maps drawn and passed by Illinois Democrats. It's also advising Change Illinois on its independent redistricting commission for the City of Chicago's ward map, marking the first time any major redistricting at the city or state level will have been undertaken by a citizen-led commission, Holzrichter said.

Mayer Brown assisted the organization in creating the commission and training members on voting rights law and continues to support the effort as it prepares a proposed city council ward map to present to the city council, he said.

But the firm is also assisting in defense against litigation challenging 2019 legislation to consolidate statewide police and fire pension systems, one of Democratic Gov. J.B. Pritzker's key legislative victories. Mayer Brown was also involved in drafting the legislation and is advising the fund as it's being established and implementing a transition of assets.

"That's something interesting and unique about Mayer Brown; we represent Republicans, but we're fighting to defend a law that was one of Pritzker's top accomplishments," Holzrichter said. "That really puts us in a unique position of providing bipartisan support to Republicans and Democrats."

Other work by Mayer Brown in the government space includes advising the Chicago Transit Authority on the use of Tax Increment Financing for public transit, a first of its kind transaction that will use TIF funds to expand public transit service to underserved South Side communities instead of its more traditional use for private development.

The firm is also advising the state of Illinois with the contemplated sale of the James R. Thompson Center in downtown Chicago and represents a large public company and multiple individual witnesses in the federal government's investigation into public corruption in Illinois.

"We continue to be a go-to firm for political issues," Holzrichter said.

The firm has also scored some recent key litigation wins, including one for photo publishing service Shutterfly, when an Illinois federal judge granted a motion to compel arbitration of a user's claims that the company violated the Illinois Biometric Information Privacy Act, a decision that could benefit other companies defending themselves against alleged BIPA violations.

Mayer Brown also represented AT&T in a Telephone Consumer Protection Act case that made it to the Seventh Circuit, and the appellate court held last February that a dialing system AT&T used to distribute unwanted survey text messages doesn't fall under the disputed statutory term "autodialer."

And on the transactional side, the firm advised Goldman Sachs Lending Partners on a first-of-its-kind \$6.8 billion financing consisting of \$3.8 billion of senior secured high yield bonds and \$3 billion of senior

secured institutional term loans to MileagePlus Holdings LLC, a subsidiary of Chicago-based United Airlines.

Debra Bogo-Ernst, a Chicago office lead for Mayer Brown's litigation and dispute resolution practice, told Law360 that Mayer Brown sets itself apart by maintaining strength in a wide variety of practice areas: antitrust, class actions, ERISA, privacy and security and white collar, to name a few.

The firm has a longstanding history of employing former assistant U.S. attorneys and former prosecutors, which uniquely positions Mayer Brown to handle public corruption and white collar cases and represent clients in heavily regulated industries, she said.

"The layer on top of all of that is our appellate group. We incorporate those folks early in the cases, so we're thinking about appellate issues even at the trial level," Bogo-Ernst said. "Getting them in on the ground, that's very unique to us here."

And going forward, Mayer Brown intends to attract strong lateral candidates in Chicago's "booming" legal market with a collaborative and cooperative firm culture, making sure it's "one firm approach" is far more than a marketing tagline, said Britt Miller, managing partner of Mayer Brown's Chicago office.

"One of the upsides of my role as managing partner is that I have an opportunity to meet and talk to almost all of our lateral partners as they come in during the interview process and while they're here," she said. "I hear a consistent message from all of them. It really is about the firm's culture and how we treat one another."

Chicago is a city with "lots of cutting edge legal talent and legal problems," bringing with it a diverse and rich source of clients, Miller said. The firm's 100-year history working with the city will continue to be a priority, with Mayer Brown attorneys committed to investing in their community on a broader level, she said.

"Chicago remains an important part of the firm, and we are committed to growing the office, growing our client base and looking to the future," Miller said.

--Editing by Alyssa Miller.