

Project Finance Group Of The Year: Mayer Brown

By Anne Cullen

Law360 (February 8, 2019, 6:31 PM EST) -- Mayer Brown LLP advised underwriters on the \$600 million financing for Florida's one-of-a-kind rail service, steered Purdue University through a uniquely funded student housing project and guided a pension fund in its record-breaking \$1.2 billion bond offering, continuing its streak as one of Law360's Project Finance Groups of the Year.

The group boasts upwards of 75 attorneys working from more than a dozen offices in cities across the globe — including Paris, London, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City and Beijing, as well as a Tokyo office that opened early last year with six new attorneys — and prides itself on tackling financing issues that run the gamut.

"Mayer Brown is unique among law firms in this space because of the breadth and depth of the work that we do across different asset classes, as well as across different types of transaction structures," said Joe Seliga, leader of the firm's infrastructure group. "And I think the types of projects we worked on in 2018 attest to that."



The team had a hand in the high-profile launch of a privately funded passenger rail line in Florida, dubbed Brightline, as Mayer Brown served as counsel to the underwriters on the first leg of Brightline's financing, which closed in December 2017 after the rail snagged approval to sell \$600 million in bonds.

Rail service kicked off early last year, running from Miami to West Palm Beach, and Seliga said he and his team have already been tapped to represent underwriters on the second round of financing, in which Brightline is pushing to sell another \$1.1 billion in bonds to fund a route to Orlando.

The rail represents the first privately developed U.S. passenger rail service in the last hundred years, Seliga said, and its success highlights his team's ability to handle a revenue-based financing structure.

On the other end of the financing spectrum, Seliga pointed to the group's work representing Purdue University last year, when it guided the Indiana institution through the development of a student housing facility. The financing for this project came through a public-private partnership supported by availability payments, which Seliga said represented entirely new challenges for Mayer Brown from its work on Brightline.

"It was a completely different type of project, and a completely different type of role we had," he said.

The deal closed in October after the school selected developer Plenary Properties Purdue LLC in July, and the facility is set to open next year with 1,300 additional student beds to offer.

The project also had a groundbreaking payment structure, Seliga noted.

"It was the first use of a public-private partnership availability payment structure for a dedicated student housing facility in the United States," he said. "This structure has been used in Canada and other countries, and it was used for a wider-scale university development at the University of California Merced, but it had never been used for a pure student housing project."

Seliga heads up the infrastructure group alongside Paul Astolfi, who also co-leads Mayer Brown's project finance group and specializes in power and energy. That side of the team also had a busy year, Astolfi said.

"We were engaged in a great number of cutting-edge power and energy transactions, including renewables deals, traditional power plant transactions and a number of marquee mergers and acquisitions," he said.

Mayer Brown represented Canada Pension Plan Investment Board in its \$1.2 billion offering of green bonds, which closed in June, and is widely regarded as the first green bond sale to be undertaken by a pension fund on a global scale. The deal is also the largest ever single green bond transaction in Canada.

The firm's work in the renewable space also included advising Allianz Global Investors in a \$760 million debt financing transaction to finance a portfolio of several solar projects across the U.S., and representing GE Energy Financial Services and JP Morgan as equity investors in connection with the development and construction of a wind project in Oklahoma.

Astolfi credits the success of the group as a whole to its international presence, which he said opens up the types of work they can take on.

"We have such a broad geographic reach — across Europe, North America, Latin America, into Asia — and we have in each of those jurisdictions the requisite experts for all manner of project finance and infrastructure transactions," Astolfi said. "We all work together across those geographies and across those specialties really hand-in-glove."

--Editing by Marygrace Murphy.