

\$85 million development made possible through building trust

By STEVE BURKS

Jason Morris has established himself and the law firm that he co-founded as one of the top land use, real estate and zoning minds in the Valley. Withey Morris PLC may be one of the more highly-respected firms that developers turn to when they need help getting approval for a project, but for Jason Morris, how he goes about his job is similar to what he did when he was putting himself through college, selling

shirts and ties at Nordstrom's.

"People need to trust you, you need to size someone up very quickly, you need to understand your product and you need to give great customer service," said Morris. "Because in the end, you're selling. I'm selling a project now instead of selling a shirt and tie, but it's the same skill set and a lot of it is understanding who you are talking to."

Morris took on the very difficult

task of getting neighborhood support and, ultimately, Phoenix City Council rezoning approval for the Residences at Phoenix Country Club project. This \$85 million project, designed by DAVIS and developed by Sunbelt Holdings, initially called for a 164-foot residential tower on the northeast corner of 7th St. and Thomas Rd., on property owned by the Phoenix Country Club that now serves as a

parking lot. But organized and vocal opposition from members of the nearby neighborhood convinced Sunbelt to lower the height to 140 feet, and finally, down to 110 feet in order to get rezoning approved. The lower height seemed to appease most of the neighbors and the project got approved by the Phoenix City Council in mid-March.

The bulk of the work to get the project approved came down to building trust with members of the community, those who will live nearby and were worried that a looming tower would hurt their property values and their way of life.

"The first and foremost issue has always been height," Morris said. "But then, there was an issue as to aesthetics and how it would look at that intersection and what we could do to improve the interaction between pedestrians on that corner and in general, activate that corner on Thomas and 7th St."

"A major factor in engendering support and trust was the formation of this architectural review committee that had

members of the opposition, as well as those supporting the project, that was working together in a series of meetings to talk about what could be acceptable on the site. That's something that I had not seen done on a zoning case before."

The building, named The Residences at the Phoenix Country Club, would consist of 125 luxury residential units built atop a two-story parking podium with an amenity deck. After hearing neighbors concerns, Sunbelt Holdings and its landscape design partner, CollectiV Landscape Architects, made some adjustments to the street-facing part of the project, which will have a double row of shade trees, a wider sidewalk and two entrances to the property with pathways to bus stops on both Thomas Rd. and 7th St.

Sunbelt Holdings waded through more than five public hearings over the last few years to reach the finish line. In the end, the city rezoned the property from a mid-rise to a Planned Urban Development, which has specific allowances and requirements for the project. While

Sunbelt and the Phoenix Country Club ultimately got their project through the approval process, the whole series of events shows the value of patience.

"I can tell you that none of this could have occurred if you didn't have a landowner that was incredibly patient, because you know that most transactions don't last this long," Morris said. "You had a combination of having an incredibly patient property owner, one that had its own community that was supportive of it, and then you had a long-standing, reputable developer in John Graham and Sunbelt Holdings, who has such a stellar reputation that folks knew that it would be done properly and done well. And John is a longtime member of the Phoenix Country Club, so there's that connection and understands the dynamics of midtown and downtown Phoenix."

"If you had a developer that was from out of state and a property owner that was in a hurry to sell, this wouldn't work. A typical, transactional escrow period just would not have been possible given how long this case had to germinate."

Sunbelt Holdings is hopeful that this project, which is likely to get underway late in 2020, will provide some much-needed life to what is a deteriorating corner. In the other three corners of the intersection are two vacant buildings and an aging Circle-K gas station.

"I think that one of the reasons that the mayor and the council supported this was because of the catalyst that this could be for that corner," Morris said. "It's rare to find an arterial-to-arterial intersection, in the fifth largest city in the country where there is such an opportunity to redevelop and recreate a whole intersection."

Morris even joked that if more new project proposals come into that intersection, he'll likely be one of the first people that developers call.

"We've got the institutional knowledge, but more importantly, we have the relationships with that community and the city officials," Morris said. "It's gratifying that we've got that reputation. In fact, the leader of the opposition, at the end of the case said, 'We've got to go get a drink and talk about this.' That's the biggest compliment you can get."

