

## Q&A WITH PARTNER JOHN CHRISTOPHER

In addition to his active municipal law, zoning and land use planning, real estate transactions and leasing, and landlord/tenant disputes practice, John Christopher is an active member of the Young Lawyers Section (YLS) of the NYSBA, where he currently holds the position of Chair-Elect. In this interview, John explains his dedication to the profession and his leadership role in the Young Lawyers Section.

### **How did you become involved with the Young Lawyers Section?**

I have been a member of the New York State Bar Association and the Young Lawyers Section since I was admitted to the Bar in 2007. However, I became actively involved when I attended a YLS half-day CLE program in 2010 during the NYSBA Annual Meeting in Manhattan. By chance, I sat next to a gentleman named Phillip Fortino. At that time, Phil was the Chair-Elect of the YLS. Phil invited me to join him at the YLS Executive Committee meeting after the CLE, so I did. Several months after that first meeting, I was appointed to the position of Co-Representative for the 10th Judicial District. The district representatives are really the boots on the ground for YLS throughout the state, since the Bar Association's headquarters are located in Albany. I held this position for several years, until I was elected to the position of Treasurer in June of 2015.

### **What are the benefits of joining the Young Lawyers Section?**

Through YLS, I have made numerous professional and personal connections with prominent attorneys throughout the state. This benefit in and of itself should be enough for a young attorney to want to join the Section. However, I have also been fortunate enough to be in a leadership position in the YLS. As an officer of the Section, I have gained invaluable experience that has provided me with opportunities within the Bar Association that I otherwise would not have been able to accomplish at this stage of my career. For example, I am one of the YLS Delegates to the NYSBA House of Delegates, which is the governing body of the Bar Association. I also am a member of the Executive Committee of the Real Property Law Section, as the liaison from the YLS. In addition, I have been afforded numerous speaking and writing opportunities that are not easy to find early in one's career.

### **Describe what your practice area entails.**

My practice is evenly split between real property law and municipal law. On the real property side, I have represented clients in commercial and residential land use and zoning applications before various municipal boards and Article 78 proceedings in connection with the same; commercial and residential purchases and sales; commercial financing, refinancing and equity recaptures; modification/workouts of commercial mortgages; 1031 Exchanges; corporate formation and structuring in connection with real estate acquisitions; representation of landlords and tenants in connection with the leasing of industrial, office and retail space, drafting and negotiation of commercial leases, amendments, modifications, etc.; training and supervision of associate attorneys in commercial landlord/tenant summary proceedings and breach-of-lease actions; and pre-acquisition (or prelease) due diligence.

The municipal side entails acting as general counsel to municipal clients; representing various municipal governing boards; review and negotiation of various contracts; drafting and negotiation of various license agreements with national mobile/cellular companies; State Environmental Quality Review Act analysis and guidance; drafting of resolutions, decisions and local laws for various

municipal boards; municipal employment and private management company employment issues; negotiation and drafting of collective bargaining agreements with municipal police officers unions; representation of municipalities before Federal Administrative Boards; negotiation and resolution of various claims; monitoring litigation being handled by insurance counsel; guidance on public bidding requirements of municipal procurement policies; and negotiation of location agreements with production companies for filming on municipal property.

**What recent trends have you seen in real estate?**

One interesting development is that the multifamily property market in New York City is down as compared to last year at this time. For many years, it was hard for an investor to find a multifamily building to purchase in the five boroughs, but this trend appears to be changing.

One reason for this decline is most likely attributed to the Rent Guidelines Board voting to freeze one-year renewal lease rental rates for the second year in a row (2% increases are allowed for two-year leases) for all rent-regulated tenants. The board cited lower operating costs due to a drop in heating fuel prices. This policy fails to account for the fact that all other costs and expenses that building owners incur, such as New York City real estate taxes, continue to rise year over year. However, this is not the worst-case scenario for the owners of multifamily buildings, as the Rent Guidelines Board actually has the power to decrease the legal rent, which is known as a “rent rollback.”

Given the fact that the vast majority of rent-regulated units are leased at a legal rent far below fair market value, the trend of declining sales in multifamily housing may continue until this administration or its policies change with regard to regulated rent increases.

**Finally, what advice would you give to newly admitted attorneys who wish to practice land use and zoning or real estate law?**

Get involved in the NYSBA and your local Bar Association. These are great places to find attorneys who already practice in the areas in which you’re interested. In my experience, seasoned attorneys who are active in the Bar Association are always happy to discuss their practice areas with young attorneys. Also, attend Continuing Legal Education courses in the area that you want to practice. If there is a more experienced attorney in your firm that practices in the area you are interested in, go speak with him or her. See if you can assist that attorney with his or her next transaction or application. If you are fortunate, as I was, you may even have an attorney in your firm that would be willing to mentor you and help develop your skills in the practice area that you’re interested in. I have been very lucky in my career to be part of a law firm with so many accomplished attorneys that I am able to turn to for advice or to work through a new legal issue.