

Tarrant City Attorney, Ben Goldman, Honored by International Association for Municipal Legal Work

For decades, the City of Tarrant, a small bedroom community turned industrial city, has struggled with blight, deserted property and environmental problems. Hand Arendall LLC partner Benjamin S. Goldman watched as city officials faced mounting problems with burned houses, abandoned cars and garbage issues.

But in the beginning of 2011, Goldman began working with city leaders to help force change. For that work, Goldman, 36, was honored with the Daniel J. Curtin Young Public Lawyer of the Year Award by the International Municipal Lawyers Association (IMLA). This award recognizes a public law practitioner who has provided outstanding service to the public and who possesses an exemplary reputation in the legal community, the highest of ethical standards and who revels in maintaining a life that balances a passion for professional excellence and the joy of family and friends.

“To be recognized for outstanding service to the public is such a tremendous honor for me professionally,” Goldman said. “As an attorney who focuses on municipal law, service to the public is the primary focus of my practice.”

Goldman accepted the award on October 22, 2012, at the IMLA’s 77th Annual Conference in Austin, Texas, where professionals from across the United States and Canada attended. Members of the Curtin family were on hand to participate in the award celebration.

“Our firm has had a long history in representing governmental entities, including numerous municipalities throughout the state,” said Roger Bates, Managing Partner of Hand Arendall. “Ben has grown into one of our lead attorneys in this area and is looked upon as an expert in the area of municipal representation. Ben is becoming even more known for his work outside of the city council meetings with his efforts to improve the quality of life in the cities he represents. For him, it’s not just being a good lawyer and doing a good job for your client, it’s about serving the community in which we live and changing people’s lives.”

Goldman was endorsed for the Daniel J. Curtin Young Public Lawyer Award by the Alabama League of Municipalities. In a letter written on behalf of his nomination, Executive Director Ken Smith said: “Ben has reviewed and helped us interpret legislation, answered questions from other municipal attorneys around the State, made presentations at our training conferences and worked without hesitation with us in any capacity we needed. He has quickly grasped many nuances of local government law

and a true willingness to go beyond simple representation of the city to helping his community improve and develop. In my opinion, he exemplifies what the Curtin Award was created to recognize.”

The award focused on the City of Tarrant’s efforts to remediate urban blight through programs that Goldman helped design and facilitate with other city leaders, including the revitalization of the historic downtown district, the creation of a tax increment financing district, the implementation of an environmental docket in the City’s Municipal Court, a new dangerous buildings ordinance and a program for the removal of blighted buildings, the implementation of a property inspection policy to bring dilapidated properties into compliance with applicable building code, and the initiation of the Tarrant Optimization Project (T.O.P.).

continued next page



Ben Goldman (left) pictured with Chuck Thompson, Executive Director of the International Municipal Lawyers Association (IMLA), was honored last month with the Daniel J. Curtin Young Public Lawyer of the Year Award by the IMLA for helping the City of Tarrant change its future. Goldman worked to remediate urban blight through programs that he helped design and facilitate with other city leaders.

"Ben exemplifies the highest degree of knowledge, class and professionalism in every endeavor in which he is involved," said Tarrant Mayor Loxil Tuck. "He has provided both initiative and leadership in creating many city ordinances to address problems facing our city."

As a part of the City of Tarrant's neighborhood improvement initiative, Goldman wanted to send a message to the community that positive change was taking place in the City's neighborhoods. Accordingly, Goldman created and the City Council adopted T.O.P., the new program. Large signs were placed on lots as the properties were remediated. In 2011-2012, the City remediated approximately two percent of residential housing in the City.

When the City had to turn the cost of garbage service over to residents because of budget constraints, the number of residents who actually signed up for service was dismal. As garbage piled up on streets and alleys, Tarrant faced a public health problem. Goldman obtained a change in City policy so that customers seeking to establish electric service could not do so until the City verified that the customer was subscribed to garbage service and, where applicable, that the customer had obtained a certificate of occupancy indicating compliance with the City's property inspection policy. While citizens were willing to go without garbage service, they were not willing to go without electric service, and the problem improved as garbage subscriptions rose dramatically.

As Tarrant's Prosecutor, Goldman began conducting Environmental Dockets designed to address problems affecting the City's neighborhoods (litter, junked vehicles, noise, vicious animals, and other nuisances). In further remedy to the garbage problem, a standard plea has been arranged for the Environmental Dockets where the defendant will remedy whatever condition brought the defendant to court, will subscribe for garbage service, will pay a monitoring fee, and will agree to remain under the Court's jurisdiction for one year. If the defendant agrees to the terms, at the end of one year, the charge will be dismissed. However, if the defendant does not agree, Goldman promises that, where applicable, he will petition the court to have the defendant sentenced to hard labor picking up trash. To date, 100 percent of defendants have agreed to the terms, and today, the City is cleaner.

The Environmental Dockets also had unintended consequences on crime in the City. "Our office didn't want to get involved in an environmental docket," said Tarrant Police Chief Dennis Reno. "But we noticed that immediately burglaries dropped by more than 50 percent. We went from 8 to 9 burglaries a week down to 2 or 3 a week. The weeks we had officers in a neighborhood serving notices, burglaries dropped. It proved that the mere

presence of a police officer in a neighborhood during the daytime will reduce burglaries."

The City of Tarrant was also honored for these changes when it received the Alabama League of Municipalities' "2012 Municipal Quality of Life Award."

"Ben is not only an outstanding lawyer but he is an outstanding person," said Lori Lein, General Counsel for the Alabama League of Municipalities, who has known Goldman for several years. "He has always given freely of his time to the League and the Alabama Municipal Attorneys Association. In doing so, he has helped us guide and support our member municipalities when issues arise affecting local government. This award is an acknowledgment of his professional abilities and integrity and is well deserved."

Goldman graduated magna cum laude, with a B.A. from Spring Hill College. He obtained his J.D. from the University of Alabama School of Law where he was a member of the National Trial Advocacy Team, a member of the Bench and Bar Legal Honor Society, a Student Bar Association Senator, and an Honor Court Justice.

As a litigator, Goldman has successfully defended clients through all stages of federal and state court litigation, including trial and appeal. He has represented more than 50 Alabama municipalities, utilities, development boards and other governmental entities and has served as corporate counsel to local, regional and national businesses, representing them in such matters as contract negotiations, employment issues and collections. In addition, he has represented and advised lenders and large creditors in bankruptcy proceedings. Pursuant to appointments, he presently serves as City Attorney and Prosecutor for Tarrant, Alabama, and as Town Attorney for Mulga, Alabama.

In service to his community, Goldman is currently a member of the Girl Scouts of North-Central Alabama Board of Directors, the Birmingham Hospitality Network Board of Directors, the Legal Aid Society of Birmingham Board of Directors, the Tarrant-Pinson Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Birmingham Tip-Off Club, the Crewe of Columbus and a volunteer for the Alabama State Bar Volunteer Lawyers Program.

Among his recognitions, Goldman was named an "Alabama Rising Star" by Super Lawyers. He is a recipient of The Literacy Council's Distinguished Partner Award and the National MS Society Leadership Award. He is also a graduate of the 2009 IADC Trial Academy hosted by Stanford Law School in Palo Alto, California, and he is a graduate of the Alabama State Bar Leadership Forum Class 7. In 2012, Goldman was named a "Top 40 Under 40" by the *Birmingham Business Journal*. ■