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New urbanism proponent joins larger firm

By Meredith Hobbs, Staff Reporter

After 35 years running his own firm, land-use lawyer G. Douglas Dillard has left Dillard & Galloway for Weissman, Nowack, Curry & Wilco. His partner, George M. Bobo, and paralegal Dottie Duarte also made the move.

Weissman Nowack's Seth G. Weissman said Dillard and Bobo, who joined Dec. 1, will expand the 55-lawyer firm's commercial real estate practice, part of its strategy for becoming a one-stop shop for developers and institutional property owners. Bobo represents developers, lenders and owners in real estate deals.

"We're trying to use the downturn to expand the scope of our practice areas," Weissman said.

At 69, Dillard said he has no desire to retire. The move to Weissman Nowack "fits well with my long-term objectives," he said, adding that he plans to practice another 10 years.

Dillard said he's a big proponent of new urban development, with mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented environments. He said Weissman shares his interest in "growing up instead of out" with more urban, high-density development and thinks Weissman Nowack's "bigger playing field" will offer opportunities for such projects in the stagnant economy.

The real estate and business firm handles closings, community association law, litigation and real estate development, including condominiums, mixed-use projects and planned communities. Clients for mixed-use projects include Cousins Properties, Novare Group, AIG, Trammell Crow Residential and Wood Partners, said Weissman.

Dillard will head the firm's zoning, land-use, eminent domain and government land-use group. Zoning and land-use issues are the first hurdle for any real estate development, he said. "Doug has worked on everything from gas stations to big mixed-use projects," he said.

William W. Galloway and the three other lawyers at Dillard & Galloway, a land-use boutique launched in 1997, will continue their practice as The Galloway Law Group.

Galloway, 52, had practiced with Dillard his entire career, starting work at the older lawyer's firm in 1984. (Dillard started practicing law in 1968, joining his father, George P. Dillard's, firm in Decatur. He took over the practice eight years later.)

Galloway said he elected not to make the move to Weissman Nowack. "I enjoy the small environment," he said. He added that Dillard's departure was "more than amicable."

"We've been together a long time," he said. "We are parting as very good friends. I wish him every success."

Galloway said his firm has just landed a big new client, Porsche Cars North America, which has engaged the Galloway Law Group to evaluate the entitlements for the old Ford plant in Hapeville. The carmaker has announced that it will move its North American headquarters from Sandy Springs to the site, which is under contract from the owner, Jacoby Development.

He said the firm also is working on land-use issues for a 500,000-square-foot mall in the metro area that has not yet been announced.

Dillard and his colleagues moved only three floors when they joined Weissman Nowack, which, like his old firm, is in Buckhead's One Alliance Center at 3500 Lenox Road.

Dillard and Weissman struck up a friendship when Weissman invited the zoning lawyer to be a guest speaker for a class he teaches at the Georgia Institute of Technology, where he's an adjunct professor of city planning. That led to the two writing a book together, "Zoning and Land Use Law in Georgia," which the Urban Land Institute will publish early next summer,

said Weissman. Their collaboration made the two realize they have common ideas about where the region's development should be heading.

"As I finish out my career, I want to leave a legacy of good decision-making—of better, more responsive development and better quality of life," said Dillard.

Historically, Dillard said, his practice has been representing developers and property owners against local governments. He worked on the development of Perimeter Mall and several of the office buildings that sprung up around the mall, such as the Concourse, part of the Terraces, Ravinia and the Cox properties around Lake Hearn.

Existing zoning laws promote horizontal, low-density development, he said, since they keep separate different uses, such as single-family residential, offices and shopping centers.

"What we need is the cooperation of local governments and changes in land-use laws to make it easier for developers," said Dillard.

Updating the region's land-use laws is a big part of that. "The thing that people don't understand is that the areas coming back with significant mixed-use development were developed that way before zoning laws," said Dillard, giving the Virginia Highland neighborhood as an example. "You've got retail in close proximity to residential and a five- to eight-unit apartment building next to a single-family dwelling."

Dillard thinks property owners are becoming interested in "repositioning their assets" as the capital that's been sitting on the sidelines during the recession is becoming more available. He said becoming part of a larger firm better positions him for such projects. "A small firm can't go to a bank and ask to handle their complex issues," he said, referring to the backlog of distressed property that many banks are holding.

Weissman said the Atlanta region's development dynamics are changing. "The typical zoning battle used to pit the neighborhood versus the developers, with the government mostly backing the neighborhoods," he said.

But local governments are starting to realize that higher-density growth is their future, as their tax bases erode, he said. "It's really changing the dynamics of where land-use and zoning cases are going to go over the next 10 years."

Weissman said he thinks 2012 will be a year with "modest growth" in development projects, after a five-year lull. He foresees increased emphasis on redeveloping existing parcels in urban areas, which is where Dillard comes in.

"The greatest challenge in our area is repositioning existing assets," said Weissman. "There are opportunities to rezone projects that were once dead on arrival—zoning plans that might have been impossible to get done."

That could mean turning a shopping center into a mixed-use development, he said, by adding office, hotel and residential space.

"The rules of the game appear to be changing somewhat in the zoning and land-use world as governments try to figure out where they can create higher-density nodes," said Weissman. That means landowners such as churches, schools and corporate headquarters in office parks may have more development possibilities for their land than they realize.

"We think Doug is in a position to help those property owners," Weissman said.

Dillard said he brings "a handful" of clients to Weissman Nowack. He's represented a couple of mosques that encountered opposition from neighboring residents to their expansion plans. The Islamic Center of North Fulton is suing the city of Alpharetta, which voted against its request last spring to build a new 12,000-square-foot building. Dillard won a similar suit on behalf of the Dar-e Abbas Shia Islamic Center in Lilburn and is representing the Church of Scientology in a suit against Sandy Springs seeking additional parking.

Consistent with his advocacy of smart growth, Dillard has become part of the organic food movement. "I've worn the black hat representing developers for so many years. It's time to let people see my green side," he said good-humoredly.

After his father died in 2006, Dillard and his wife started operating Dillwood Farms, a 60-acre farm in Loganville that his father had run as a hobby, raising livestock and, later, fruit and vegetables.

The Dillard's switched to organic farming in 2008 and are supplying produce to Rathbun's, Restaurant Eugene and other local restaurants, as well as individuals and Savi Urban Market, in which Dillard has a minority interest. Savi has a location in Inman Park and just opened a second in Brookhaven on Dresden Road

"We're farming five or six acres, trying to figure it out," said Dillard.

"He's just put in carrots," added Weissman.

Melinda C. Pillow has joined Davis, Matthews & Quigley as an associate from Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton. Pillow joins the firm's family law practice. She was the 2010 pro bono associate of the year at Kilpatrick, assisting pro bono clients with adoption, child custody and other family law issues.

Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton has established a professional relationship with a Dubai law firm, Hani Qurashi Law Firm. The firm "established a beachhead in the Middle East" in 2008 with a Dubai office focused on construction and engineering matters, said Thomas P. Wilson, the head of the firm's Middle East practice, in a statement. The cooperation agreement with the Dubai firm will give Kilpatrick more access to the Saudi Arabian market, he said.

Kenneth B. Hodges III of Ashe, Rafuse & Hill has been named to the Georgia Chamber of Commerce's board of directors. Hodges was the 2010 Democratic candidate for state attorney general.

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