



## Joe Gattuso

### A Giving Soul in Zoning, Land Use, Regulatory Practice

by Dustin J. Seibert

“You’re smart like Angelo. You should become a lawyer like him.”

Joseph P. Gattuso is a man with a lot of interesting stories to tell. But the above refrain is connected to what might be his most telling story — why he became a lawyer.

Gattuso spent a childhood being compared to his older cousin, Angelo Provenzano, so he had pretty big shoes to fill. Provenzano was a Chicago lawyer who ran for public office and became the 28th Ward alderman, as well as the youngest member of the Chicago City Council up to that point in the early 1960s.

Despite being “always moving and in someone’s hair or under someone’s feet or both,” Gattuso’s self-proclaimed pest status didn’t quell comparisons to Provenzano.

“From as far back as I can remember, everyone in my family — from my parents down — told me that I’m smart like my cousin and should go down his career path,” Gattuso says. “When you grow up

hearing it constantly, it's got to make some kind of impression."

Gattuso discovered in time that he shared Provenzano's love of politics and government, which made it easier to mimic his cousin's career progress. "I always had it in the back of my mind, so I thought, 'Why not? Let's give this a shot?'"

Decades later, Gattuso continues to build a reputation as one of Chicago's premier land and governmental use regulation practice attorneys at **Taft Stettinius & Hollister LLP**. He even started out with the help of the late Provenzano, who wrote him a letter of recommendation to their shared alma mater, DePaul University College of Law, where Gattuso eventually made the law review.

"I don't know if I was necessarily as smart as (Provenzano), but at some point, I realized I had something, and it sank in to pursue it," Gattuso says.

## Multiple Influences

If becoming a lawyer, in general, came as a result of old-fashioned familial prodding, getting involved in the real estate portion of the legal industry came as a result of curiosity during his formative years. His father, also named Joseph, was a meat cutter before retiring and investing in real estate, first in a grocery store in Park Ridge and ultimately in a strip mall in Arlington Heights that "kept us going," he says.

When looking throughout the area for an ideal investment opportunity after selling the grocery business, the elder Joe carried his wife and son, "all over Illinois, Wisconsin and Michigan, looking at investment properties, both residential and commercial, and wheeling and dealing before ultimately settling on a place," he says.

"I was really interested as a child in how these buildings were put together," he says.

During his first trimester at the University of Illinois at Chicago, he flirted with majoring in architecture and engineering. But not being mathematically inclined, he "walked away from that quickly," he says, eventually majoring in political science.

Gattuso admits getting involved in the world of real estate came about a lot more quickly than it would have had he not decided to marry his wife, Donna, after his first year of college. The need to become a providing family man sent him seeking a day job while attending school at night.

He got a job at the Chicago Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) in 1978 when

a friend of his father introduced him to Jack Guthman, then the ZBA's chairman. Gattuso broke the ice with Guthman by telling him he wanted to be a lawyer and sharing the age-old, misinterpreted *Henry IV* quote, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers."

It started a 10-year gig with the board that served as the foundation of his legal career.

"When I first started, someone handed me a copy of the zoning ordinance and told me I would really need to learn it quickly. Boy were they right," Gattuso says. "That job was fielding phone calls, folks filing applications or coming into the office for information. It was a quick learning curve. Zoning is a very dynamic and fluid area of regulation, and every site is a bit different."

Robert Grela, founder of R.A. Grela & Associates, worked with Gattuso as a zoning plan examiner during Gattuso's ZBA tenure. Grela has remained a loyal friend ever since.

"Joe's a man of honor whose word, coupled with his knowledge of the zoning code, helps to get many things done in the

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city of Chicago and adjoining counties," Grela says. "He's a leader in his field and, because of his word and honor, he separates himself from a lot of people. He not only talks the talk but walks the walk."

## Law Movements

Gattuso left the ZBA in 1987 while enrolled in law school at DePaul. As a student, he had designs on following Guthman to Sidley Austin LLP, where Guthman was practicing zoning and government regulatory law. He says he saw a potential opportunity trailing behind Guthman when he left the ZBA.

"I lobbied him and said, 'Jack, let me come with you.' I didn't care what I did," Gattuso says. "I took a job as a paralegal. Not a lot of butchers' sons from the West Side of Chicago that go to school at night at a local school can say they have a firm like that on their resume."

Upon graduation in 1990, the firm did something it had only done twice before when it offered Gattuso, whose paralegal

spot was a staff position, a job as an attorney. "It was quite an honor for me, and it also served as proof that 12 years of night school had finally paid off."

In 1996, Gattuso and two colleagues moved from Sidley Austin to Altheimer & Gray. His time at that firm ended unceremoniously when the firm dissolved in 2003, catching him off guard following a trip to Germany with his family.

"I was home from that trip for 10 minutes when I got a call from one of my partners that I thought was about a project we were working on," he says. "She told me that the firm is dissolving, and I had no indication when I left that such a thing was on the horizon. As my birthday was on the following day, it was a welcome home, happy birthday punch in the stomach rolled into one. Thank you very much, may I have another."

The next morning, he was up making lists for potential jobs by 6 a.m. and making calls by 9 a.m. In a stroke of fortuitous timing, a person who worked with Guthman at what was then Shefsky & Froelich had just resigned. Gattuso heard of this and called Guthman right away. He joined Shefsky & Froelich shortly thereafter. The firm merged with Taft Stettinius & Hollister in 2014.

Save for the period of time from 1996 to 2003, when Gattuso was at Altheimer, he's worked with Guthman for his entire career and "couldn't be more honored."

"People say things about him like he's a master of the game and knows all the ins and outs, and it's all true," Gattuso says of Guthman. "When government officials make decisions, politics always come into play. Jack is a master of knowing the nuances and how it all works. No one does it better than him."

Guthman has a mutual affection for his mentee, having found him "compelling from the moment he stepped outside of high school," he says.

"He was interesting as a person, but it was also very clear he was someone who wanted to make something of himself, even though had no concrete plan of college at the time," Guthman says. "My instincts were that he was a young man who deserved an opportunity with the ZBA job. He convinced me then, and I have never for a day lost faith."

"People immediately like him. They understand that he's always right above board with them and doesn't play hide and seek. He maintains a constant respect for the manner in which he goes about his work."

Tammy Cipriano echoes Guthman's sentiment regarding Gattuso's insistence on keeping all of his business dealings above board and legitimate.

Cipriano, manager of corporate governance at foodservice company Compass Group USA, started working with Gattuso when she joined the company as a paralegal in the 1990s and came across his name as someone who'd worked with her predecessor during his Alzheimer days.

"There are a lot of civil liabilities involved in the alcoholic beverage industry, and he's never compromised his ethics or values," Cipriano says. "I have a comfort level with him more than others in his industry, and I never doubt that the advice he gives me is accurate and concise."

## What's Truly Important

At this point, Gattuso can walk through any stretch of downtown Chicago and see the end result of a case or transaction he's worked on — giving him a great sense of accomplishment.

That which brings true happiness to his heart, however, is the work he does — inside and outside Taft — to benefit those who haven't been as fortunate as him.

"Obviously, the profession is financially rewarding — you help a developer build a high-rise, they make a bundle of money, you make a bundle of money," he says. "All of that is great, but it's not as rewarding as the personal things I do."

For many years, Gattuso has done pro bono work for St. Leonard's Ministries, which offers ex-offenders residential and work opportunities in an effort to help them re-enter society and avoid the influences that return so many people to prison. He has worked on supportive housing developments for the elderly in a number of communities, including projects such as Hancock House and Kennedy Jordan Manor. Gattuso has also worked with Senior Lifestyle Corporation.

He also recently completed a special use application for a facility on Chicago's West Side that will provide transitional housing for high school students in the community who experience housing instability.

"It's important to me to play a small role in making a big difference for kids," he says. "These are good kids who get good grades and try hard to be successful, but how does a kid concentrate on his school work if they don't know where they will sleep at night or what they will have to eat?"

Much of his giving nature comes from his family and unwavering Catholic faith. Gattuso recalls a Christmastime story from about a decade ago when he encountered

a young couple during a walk to look at property downtown. They wound up in front of what used to be St Vincent's at 630 N. LaSalle St., the orphanage from which Gattuso was adopted.

"They were in their late teens, it was cold outside, and the lady was expecting," he says. "There I am in a briefcase and suit. The man asks if I could spare a few bucks. I gave the kid \$20 and told him that I hope it gets him where he needs to go."

"I thought about how, many years ago, there was another couple that didn't have anywhere to sleep and was having a baby," he says as he looks up. "I get it...you sent these people to me.' That's how it always worked for me. He says, 'Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' I subscribe to that."

Gattuso's inherent empathy expands to one of his most recent zoning transactions: In 2015, he represented Union Group of Illinois in its effort to establish a medical cannabis dispensary in Norwood Park. The dispensary opened in November 2016 following a bumpy approval process, thanks in part to 41st Ward Alderman Anthony Napolitano, a former firefighter and police officer who openly opposed the opening of the dispensary.

Once Gattuso began working on the project, he encountered the widely disseminated story of Charlotte Figi. The young girl experienced several hundred epilepsy-related grand mal seizures a month before her parents and doctors discovered a strain of cannabis oil that dramatically reduced her seizures. This prompted her family to move to the cannabis-friendly state of Colorado so she could be treated. The cannabis oil treatment reduced the seizures to several per month. Figi, now 10, wasn't expected to live past age five until this course of treatment was made available.

"It's fascinating because everyone thinks about (cannabis) as Cheech and Chong; a bunch of drug humor," he says. "Then you look at medical literature and begin to learn about its benefits. The best doctors couldn't come up with anything else, and now this child can live a normal life. If that's not a miracle, you show me one."

He says many lawyers won't get involved with cannabis because of the stigma attached, but he urges them to look no further than the afflictions of the people who qualify for a medical cannabis card.

"I guarantee you wouldn't want to have any of the afflictions listed in the statute just to get a card," he says. ■