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Cates Award

Brokers battle herculean odds to seal deal

Atlanta Business Chronicle - by [Janet Jones Kendall](#) Contributing writer

Fifty-seven plots of land, 37 property owners, Marthasville Development, Jamestown Properties, Green Street Properties, the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#), [Georgia Power Co.](#), the [Environmental Protection Agency](#), the Georgia [Department of Natural Resources](#), the Cobb County commissioners, the Upper Chattahoochee River Keepers, armored cars, a pond full of dead fish and an angry dog.

That's the short version, if short is the right word, for what it takes to win the Alvin B. Cates Award from the Atlanta Commercial Board of Realtors. And that's only some of what faced John DeCouto of [Bryant Commercial Real Estate Partners](#) LLC and Norm Richie of Batson-Cook Realty LLC over five years to earn the 2010 Cates Award.

"We looked at five [entrants] and each and every one of them was a complex transaction with a lot of creativity and a lot of patience involved in them, but the one that John and Norm were involved in took place over a number of years and the diversity of who they had to deal with and their perseverance just really got everybody's attention," ACBR awards chairman Steve Dils said. "All of [the awards committee] said we couldn't imagine doing something like that. That's what the Cates Award is about. It brings to bear a lot of things you don't deal with in a normal transaction."

The final result of DeCouto's and Richie's work is a contiguous 220-acre parcel on the Chattahoochee River that will become, in part, Riverview Heights, an 85-acre completely sustainable community that includes residential, recreational and green spaces.

[editorial]



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And it was no small feat getting there.

The deal, initiated by Marthasville Development, began as a plan to buy a 4.4-acre parcel on the Chattahoochee River in Cobb County. As the project expanded, so did the responsibilities, including changing the county's Future Land Use Plan, negotiating right-of-way acquisition with Georgia Power and changing FEMA's floodway map.

And that was the boring part. The deal's real intrigue came when it was time to deal with the various landowners of the parcels. Riverview Road, from which the land is accessed, has for years been a heavy industrial area with junkyards, heavy equipment operators and trucking companies, as well as private landowners.

Purchasing each piece of land proved to have challenges of its own, some more colorful than others.

Richie and DeCouto dealt with each property owner separately. They offered leaseback deals to sweeten the pot for reluctant sellers but had to be even more creative to get some of the deals done.

One property owner initially told Richie he would deal only in cash because of his mistrust of banks. Richie eventually talked to an armored car company to facilitate exchanging \$360,000 in cash before the owner finally relented to a bank deposit.

Another property owner who took awhile to sign his deal accused DeCouto of sabotage after 10,000 gallons of cooking grease from an environmental waste company ended up in a pond on his property. The property owner called the Cobb County police, the Department of Natural Resources and the EPA to complain. DeCouto eventually smoothed out the incident by restocking all the fish that were killed in the pond, among other things.

Richie also had an issue with animals during his part of the sale. After jumping a fence to leave a note on the truck of one property owner, he was chased into the bed of the truck by the owner's angry dog and had to jump from the bed of the truck to the top of the fence to escape.

"This transaction was dead a number of different times," Dils said, "and they revived it and kept it going."

According to colleagues, Richie and DeCouto were the perfect people to ensure the deal's survival.

Andrew Ulsh, the vice president of real estate for Batson-Cook, described Richie as a "one-man show" in his office.

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“While I, and BC Realty, do provide support services to Norm, he has accomplished most of his achievements on his own. Norm prides himself in not selling all of the bells and whistles. He does not use elaborate marketing and advertising techniques, and he works out of his house and car,” Ulsh said. “I believe that Norm’s success is attributed to his vast professional relationships and his desire to specialize on one segment of the industry — land brokerage.”

Dick Bryant, the president of Bryant Commercial Real Estate Partners, said the Cates Award is a fitting tribute for DeCouto, who has more than \$200 million in lifetime sales.

“John is extremely bright and competent,” Bryant said. “He has an excellent work ethic and is extremely conversant on all issues pertaining to commercial real estate. This is the highest honor a commercial Realtor can receive. It validates his expertise and tenacity.”

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