

MVP: Winston & Strawn's Michael E. Pikiel Jr.

By **Emily Sides**

Law360 (September 22, 2021, 4:25 PM EDT) -- Michael E. Pikiel Jr. lead a Winston & Strawn LLP team that advised note purchasers in the sale of about \$479 million of senior secured notes by Prince George's County Education & Community Partners LLC for a first-of-its-kind project to imagine, build, finance and maintain six new public schools, securing him a spot among Law360's 2021 Project Finance MVPs.

HIS BIGGEST ACCOMPLISHMENT THIS YEAR:

Raising his two-year-old child with his wife amid the pandemic has been Pikiel's greatest achievement, he said. Of his professional achievements during a busy year, he said his work related to the public-private partnership for the Prince George's County Public Schools in Maryland was his biggest achievement.

Prince George's County Education & Community Partners is set to complete five new middle schools and a K-8 school by 2023, which altogether will seat 8,000 students, according to the Prince George's County school district, which boasts that it is the first public-private partnership in the country that includes both construction and maintenance of multiple public schools.

Pikiel said this sort of deal helps the school district with the expensive undertaking of building new schools as it sees a growing student population.

"I think the idea of letting the private sector invest in public education facilities is sometimes frightening for people, or they don't understand how it works," Pikiel said. "So there's usually some resistance to it. But the fact that Prince George's County was able to get all of the stakeholders, the board and get the communities behind the projects, and you can actually get these six schools bundled together to do this, I think it makes us pretty special."

HIS PROUDEST MOMENT THIS YEAR:

Pikiel's proudest moment this year was serving as lead counsel to Empire State Thruway Partners LLC as the company agreed to redevelop, finance, operate and maintain 27 service plazas that await travelers on a superhighway.

Empire State Thruway Partners agreed to invest \$450 million in the plazas, which haven't been updated



since the 1990s, according to an announcement from the New York State Thruway Authority's board of directors.

Finalizing the lease agreement with the thruway authority was his proudest moment of this year, he said, because the deal was years in the making.

"That was a pretty long, kind of arduous process," he said.

Pikiel said that working amid the pandemic toward a financial close on March 30, 2020, and a commercial close on July 21, 2020, was "no small undertaking."

"I think for an asset like that or for a group of assets like that where the success of the project ultimately depends on people getting in their cars and driving from point A to point B on the thruway, to be working through a lot of these issues at a time when nobody was leaving their houses was pretty challenging," he said.

WHY HE IS A PROJECT FINANCE ATTORNEY:

Pikiel has advised a range of clients, such as sponsors, developers and investors, in transactions over a nearly two-decade legal career.

"To be able to see at the end of the day a building or group of buildings or a power plant or something — it is a tangible result of your work over a period of time," Pikiel said. "That's rewarding and one of the things I like the best about this industry."

Pikiel said the "beauty of being an infrastructure lawyer" is working on important projects around the country, such as a flood diversion project he's working on in North Dakota.

"When I think about the state of infrastructure in America and how much it's fallen into a state of disrepair since a lot of it was built 20, 30 or 40 years ago, I like to think that I'm able to help contribute to reinvesting in and rebuilding America's infrastructure," Pikiel said.

HIS ADVICE FOR JUNIOR ATTORNEYS:

Pikiel advised early-career attorneys to seek out an area of the law they enjoy.

"Find something you like and stick with it," Pikiel said. "I think being a lawyer can be a bit of a grind if you don't like what you're doing. For me, it's really important to like what you're doing in the industries you're working in and the people that you work with."

— *As told to Emily Sides*

Law360's MVPs are attorneys who have distinguished themselves from their peers over the past year through high-stakes litigation, record-breaking deals and complex global matters. A team of Law360 editors selected the 2021 MVP winners after reviewing nearly 900 submissions.