

# Daily Journal

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## TOP CALIFORNIA LAW FIRMS

### ‘Surprisingly Resilient’: Developing California in Good Times and Bad

**By Sara Randazzo**  
Daily Journal Staff Writer

Over the past year, Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton LLP’s real estate, land-use and environmental group has led the fight to approve some of California’s biggest development projects.

In one of the most significant California Environmental Quality Act cases to make its way to the state Supreme Court in 2010, a Sheppard Mullin team defended Wal-Mart’s right to build a Supercenter in Stockton without undergoing further environmental review, despite the argument by a group of Stockton residents that they weren’t given ample time to challenge the project based on environmental concerns.

Firm lawyers also successfully defended a series of CEQA-related lawsuits in the city of Sacramento that challenged the Environmental Impact Report for a massive multi-use development project at the site of an old rail yard. The victories, which land-use partner Judith V. Davidoff called “a really big deal to win,” are now on appeal.

Other projects include representing Salesforce.com Inc. in the acquisition and development of a 14-acre parcel in the Mission Bay neighborhood of

San Francisco for a new international headquarters; representing UC San Francisco in the \$200 million development of a neurosciences research and clinical facility; working on the renovation of the Rose Bowl Stadium in Pasadena; and defending CEQA challenges for the Hotel del Coronado in San Diego and for NRG Energy in Orange County.

Davidoff said Sheppard Mullin’s expertise in real estate, land-use and environmental work is equally strong across its California offices and is what drew her and five other attorneys to the firm in 2007 from Steefel, Levitt & Weiss [which merged with Manatt, Phelps & Phillips LLP later that year].

“When I was thinking of leaving my prior firm with my group, Sheppard Mullin was the only firm I talked to,” Davidoff said. “It was the quality of the existing land-use practice, not only in San Francisco, but in all their offices. That’s very unusual to find.”

Practice group leader Domenic C. Drago said the 53-attorney group managed to stay busy during the economic downturn, even though real estate development slowed.

“We were surprisingly resilient,” Drago said. “More recently, we’re seeing a pretty strong uptick in transactions and activity, which is encouraging.”