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Amicus Curious

Educating people on agribusiness

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When Brian C. Shea isn't immersed in the work of his law practice, focusing on the areas of finance, commercial real estate and corporate law, he's taking in lessons in such areas as farm economics, fertilizers and chemicals, global weather patterns and climate change and ethical production of livestock.

These are a few of the topics explored by The Chicago Farmers, a 75-year-old nonprofit agricultural business organization whose members seem to be as diverse as the subject areas that bring them together each month. The organization focuses on educating people and companies on agribusiness, and owning and investing in farmland.

The people who make up the organization, whose "farm away from the farm" is just a few blocks from the Chicago Board of Trade and the Mercantile Exchange — as its home base for meetings is described on its website — include farmland owners and commodity traders, farm management professionals, real estate consultants and farm equipment manufacturers.

There are farmer members, who meet up with the group "when they're not working the land," Shea said. And there are lawyer members of The Chicago Farmers like Shea, of counsel in the Chicago firm of Polsinelli, Shughart P.C. and president of his own firm of Shea Law P.C.

Shea, who has been involved in the organization for more than 10 years, serves as its newly elected president.

While the 250 or so members of The Chicago Farmers come from diverse backgrounds, Shea said, the members share a common thread: an interest in agriculture.

"It's really a whole host of people," he said.

Shea, whose clients include farm owners involved in buying, selling or leasing farmland, first joined the organization at the encouragement of a client, who then was the group's president. "I kind of worked my way up the ranks," he said.



Chicago attorney Brian C. Shea (right) is with Jim Ward, a member of The Chicago Farmers. Shea serves as president of The Chicago Farmers, a nonprofit organization that focuses on educating people and companies on agribusiness, and owning and investing in farmland.

For Shea, The Chicago Farmers is a source for personal enrichment. "That's No. 1," he said. But the attorney said his involvement in the group also helps him gain more knowledge to assist his clients.

"I keep learning all the time from these good speakers. They bring us current information," Shea said. "I like to keep up on what's going on in the financial side of agriculture, the land value side, the lease rate side, the commodity pricing side.

"And then, just keeping up with trends." That includes global trends, such as agricultural developments in Brazil and China, as well as trends involving alterna-

tive sources of energy.

Armed with an MBA, Shea was a banker for seven years before turning to law. The 1986 graduate of Loyola University Chicago School of Law also has been managing his wife's family-owned farm in Indiana for 30 years. He said the 240-acre farm has been leased to the same farmer since Shea's involvement in it.

Richard E. Schell, of counsel in Des Plaines-based Wagner & Schell LLP, is a member and a past-president of The Chicago Farmers. The attorney, who

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focuses his practice in international law and in U.S. agricultural and food law, grew up in a 150-year multigenerational Illinois farm family near Rockford.

Schell has been involved with The Chicago Farmers since 2000.

"It's a fabulous group," Schell said. "It's kind of the forgotten element of farming, which is half of the farmland in Illinois is rented, so it's a group for landlords."

Schell has been active in representing clients in the local, green, organic food and agriculture sectors.

"I see these areas, along with urban agriculture, as areas of real potential for people in farming," he said.

Overall growth in the organic sector, Schell said, has increased "like clock work" by about 20 percent a year. With the recession, that sector this last year grew about 5 percent, he said. "When you look at what the rest of the economy is doing, a 5 percent growth rate is pretty good," Schell said.

Shea said farmers today are facing some of the same issues as a lot of people are in a poor economy. However, he said, "they have

their own set of issues, too."

"There are national policies on agriculture," Shea said. "Every time the farm bill comes out we have a big speaker come out and talk about how it will impact local farmers.

"There's always a lot of pressure to produce in the most efficient and effective way to feed the world, basically, while maintaining integrity in terms of the land," Shea said. "They're always facing issues of what chemicals to use or fertilizers to use. What are the best strains of genetically engineered seed?"

In addition to its monthly sessions on hot topics in the agriculture industry and in policies affecting agriculture, The Chicago Farmers offers field trips to agribusiness facilities in the northern half of Illinois.

And, in recent years, the organization has embarked on international farm tours to study the agribusiness culture and tour facilities of different countries, such as the "Farming in France 2010" tour it organized earlier this year. Next year, Shea said, the group will travel to Sweden.

The international trips benefit the organization's annual scholarship program, which awards college scholarships and a scholarship to the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences.

In keeping with The Chicago Farmer's interest in the global aspects of agriculture, both from a business and informational exchange standpoint, Shea said the organization will invite a large number of consuls general from foreign consulates in Chicago to an upcoming reception and program, as it did for the first time last year.

And, in February the organization presents its annual Farmland Investment Fair. The day-long event brings together people already in farmland investment, or considering it as an alternative to other financial investment, Shea said.

"With the risk in the equity markets and the low returns in bank CDs and treasuries, people are looking at farmland investment," Shea said. "For many, many decades, it's been a relatively stable, safe place to invest. The returns aren't dramatic, but they tend to be consistent."