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Sheppard Mullin Attorney Will Head Downtown San Diego Partnership

By Pat Broderick
Daily Journal Staff Writer

SAN DIEGO — Multitasking lawyer Donna D. Jones got some advice from her mother recently.

"She said, 'You really should get someone to help you with the laundry,'" Jones said. "I told her, 'Mother, please! It's the only to-do item I have on my list that I can start and finish in two hours.'"

A partner in the real estate, land use and environmental practice group of Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton's San Diego office, Jones, 48, is used to tackling issues that can plod along for years.

And now she will tackle another long-term job: keeping a keen eye on development and planning issues in the central city as the new chair of the Downtown San Diego Partnership, a nonprofit business association comprising 320 local business and property owners.

Among the group's front-burner issues this year are the C Street Master Plan — an ambitious effort by the city to revitalize a depressed and congested area of downtown. Also atop the association's agenda are selection of a developer for the renovation of the Civic Center, efforts to balance the needs of the public with private enterprise on the waterfront, helping the homeless and working to bring in more businesses downtown.

"We can't become all residential," Jones said. "We also have to have business downtown and a variety of uses. We hope to make a big step forward this year."

The group will be looking for a permanent private funding mechanism to support its efforts, and plans to hire someone whose sole focus will be business attraction.

A key element of downtown development is the waterfront, which long has generated controversy, pitting private developers against those who want to see more parks and open spaces.

"All these amenities cost money, and it's difficult to get public dollars to go toward them," Jones said. "Sometimes people only



TOM KURTZ/ For the Daily Journal

"Downtown is a perfect place for smart growth and urban infill," said Donna D. Jones, 2008 chair of the Downtown San Diego partnership.

focus on the public good, but there has to be something in it for those doing the projects as well. It's a careful balancing act, and it can be frustrating when you are in the middle of it."

Jones' portfolio includes Petco Park, home to the Padres, where she worked on the project's environmental and entitlement issues. Since 1994, she has represented Black Mountain Ranch in the development of Santaluz and Del Sur communities in the city of San Diego.

Jones is a big booster of the "smart growth" concept of building communities near transit lines.

"Downtown is a perfect place for smart growth and urban infill," she said.

Domenic Drago, who heads up Sheppard Mullin's real estate, land use and environmental practice group, thinks that Jones is good fit as the new chair.

"She is one of the premiere land-use lawyers in San Diego," he said. "She has a lot of energy, and brings a depth of knowledge

to the position. With her legal background in planning and environmental issues, she brings a good perspective to the downtown organization, and she has great relationships with city representatives."

Barbara Warden, president of the Downtown San Diego Partnership, also gives Jones high marks.

"We are very excited that Donna is going to be chair this year," Warden said. "She is very bright and very aware of how we get things done in the city of San Diego. Everything takes a lot of work behind the scenes, and she does understand that one needs to have patience to get through any system. She is a chair who really cares about the future of downtown, and will use her time and talent to move our projects forward."

Warden also appreciates Jones' team spirit. "She is one of these people who gives credit to a lot of other people, and includes everyone in the process," Warden said. "I think that this gives them more energy."

A Poway resident, Jones earned her law degree from the University of Texas in 1990. She received a bachelor's degree in journalism from Texas A&M University in 1981.

"I never dreamed of being a lawyer," she said. "No one in my family was in the law. I wanted to be a journalist."

But after half a dozen years toiling in corporate communications, and a few layoffs, Jones decided that law combined everything that she loved — research, reading and writing, and an education that never ends.

"I love learning," she said. "If I wasn't doing this, I could be a student for the rest of my life."

Jones is married to Jack Abbott, chief executive officer of Interactivate Inc., a marketing company based in downtown San Diego. She has two children, Austin Williams, 16, and Chandler Williams, 13.

She gives much credit for her success to her parents, Jeff and Maryann Jones, of Tyler, Texas.

"I will always feel like a Texan in my heart, as much as I love San Diego," said Jones.