

Career & Workplace

How Steven Schwarz built up ViaWest Group to serve the Southwest



Image: Phoenix Business Journal

Steven Schwarz, founding partner at ViaWest Group.

JIM POULIN | PHOENIX BUSINESS JOURNAL



By [Audrey Jensen](#) – Reporter, Phoenix Business Journal
Jan 18, 2024

Steven Schwarz made what he considers a fortuitous decision in 2016 to pivot ViaWest Group's main focus on industrial development in metro Phoenix.

After dabbling in acquisitions and focusing on value-add office in the first decade of the business, Schwarz decided that moving into industrial development would be a more sustainable strategy – just before the sector was about to catch fire in the Valley.

"Since then we've really pushed hard on the industrial side," Schwarz said.

Since its founding in 2003, the company – also known for its major real estate acquisitions and property management capabilities – has built itself over the past two decades from being a small local firm to a prominent name in the Valley's real estate world.

After establishing itself among the big players in the Phoenix office sector, ViaWest has continued to leverage its local relationships and experience to bolster needed industrial space for the small to midsize tenants, where a majority of the demand lies in the region.

This has also allowed the company to expand throughout the Southwest with a new office in Denver to serve Colorado, Utah, Nevada and Southern California and further focus on acquisitions in the industrial sector and potentially multifamily.

The full-service commercial real estate investment, development and property management firm has made more than \$2.8 billion in aggregate transactions and managed, developed or owned nearly 12 million square feet since it was founded.

How has ViaWest positioned itself to be a relevant real estate firm in the Valley?

Phoenix is one of the most dynamic markets in the country so we're fortunate to be here. With that, we're one of the very few truly locally-grown companies. I recognized that early – a lot of competitors are regional offices and national companies, so [we] try to use that to our advantage. We get involved in the community, we're on every real estate organization board, we're involved in charities and economic organizations. It's because we care about this market and we realized those relationships are very valuable.

What project has been most memorable to you? The one that really transformed our company the most was our acquisition of Biltmore Center in 2015. It was a \$163 million project – it was one of the largest office deals in Arizona history at that time. Then we came in and did an awesome renovation of it and took it from 72% leased to 97% and people realized that we were here. With the success of that it led to a lot more deals and capital relationships as well.

What were the biggest challenges in building up ViaWest? We're constantly dealing with the push and pull of the macro economy, geopolitical stuff and trying to monitor and figure out how we position ourselves within that. The other piece is how to manage and build internally. The challenges in the beginning were, if you can't afford to hire the best people you try to scrap by and figure it out. And being able to focus on the things that mattered versus being distracted by our debits and credits. Now I cannot be blessed with a better team, every division, every group is phenomenal.

How has your company navigated through the evolving Phoenix market? Here it's always shifting and moving and it enables us to do that as well. It's been a great fit for us because of all of the different asset classes and the ability to invest and manage. It's a great marriage for how we are experienced and how we structure the company. Now it's such a place where capital wants to be that it's enabled us to develop relationships that we've now utilized to go into other markets.

What's your outlook for Phoenix commercial real estate? Industrial in Phoenix is going to continue to be a great asset class. It's going to have some softening with the amount of supply coming on in the next two years. The faucet has turned off on new development so two, three years from now when all of that fills up we're going to have another good pop of potentially rents and people jumping back in. Office is very challenging. The class 'A' stuff is doing quite well on the whole, but I'm very concerned about the impact that office is going to have on the banks and overall economy because it's a pretty big piece and it's pretty challenged.

Steven Schwarz talks about what makes Phoenix stand apart from larger markets, staying competitive in commercial real estate and advice on starting a development firm

at PhoenixBusinessJournal.com.

Steven Schwarz

Title: Founding partner

Company: ViaWest Group

Education: Bachelor's degree in marketing, University of Texas at Austin

What's the hardest lesson you've learned? I used to think you try to take somebody's strengths and weaknesses and try to make them better at the things they're not good at and I've realized over time – why do that when you can take somebody's strength and make that really shine.

What character trait are you most proud of and what do you want to improve? I'm not a highly emotional person, I'm pretty pragmatic and data driven, so when I look at things I try not do them out of emotion. What that allows me to do is keep a lot of things going. Part of that same issue is I probably don't celebrate the wins and give as many pats on the back as I should because life is short, you should really enjoy every success you have.

This article was edited for brevity and clarity.