

# 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Illinois Financial Forecast Forum

## Speaker Biographies

### *Michael Carney*

**Vice President  
Heitman LLC**

Michael Carney is a Vice President in Heitman's 18-person Investment Research group. He is responsible for all U.S. medical office and apartment sector research. In this role he conducts analysis of trends in demographics, macroeconomics, capital markets and property market fundamentals in order to form investment strategies. Prior to joining Heitman, Mike's roles included work in urban planning and real estate finance consulting. He started his career in the finance department of Burton Snowboards in Burlington, Vermont. Mike received an MS in Urban Planning and Policy from the University of Illinois at Chicago and a BS in Business Administration from Saint Michael's College in Colchester, Vermont. He sits on the Research Committee of the National Multifamily Housing Council, Revista's Rising Leaders Council, and serves on the board of directors for the Downtown Oak Park Business Alliance in his community of Oak Park, Illinois.

### *Elliott Cook*

**Director of Real Estate  
Retail Strategies**

Elliott Cook is the director of real estate for the Downtown Strategies division of Retail Strategies. He works with cities throughout the country conducting Downtown Visioning Workshops and helping to develop strategic plans with a focus on local real estate assets. Elliott also works to train downtown property owners within client communities. Part of his director of real estate role, Elliott teaches community leaders how to 'speak retail' to retailers, brokers, and developers through the Retail Academy program.

Prior to working for the Downtown Strategies team, Elliott specialized in retail recruitment working to further retail and restaurant development in partner communities in Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and California.

His past work experience also includes property management for Retail Specialists in Birmingham, Alabama and at Vornado/Charles E. Smith Realty Trust in the Washington, D.C. area. He also served as an aide to United States Representative Spencer Bachus in his legislative office on Capitol Hill.

Elliott holds a bachelor's degree in history from Auburn University and sits on the board for the Urban Land Institute (ULI) Alabama Chapter. He has been a featured speaker for numerous organizations including ICSC Vegas, the Illinois Municipal League, the Missouri Municipal League, the

Association of Washington Cities, the North Carolina League of Municipalities, the Maryland Mayor's Association, and at the Washington Tourism Summit.

## *Benjamin Gehrt*

**Partner  
Clark Baird Smith**

Benjamin Gehrt is a Partner in the law firm Clark Baird Smith LLP, where he focuses his practice on traditional labor law and employment litigation. He has experience in grievance and interest arbitration cases, contract negotiations, and unfair labor practice charges. Ben also represents clients in EEO and wage-hour litigation.

Ben has represented public and private sector clients in contract negotiations and interest arbitration. In those settings, he has helped clients obtain significant cost savings through changes in staffing levels, wage schedules, retiree insurance benefits, sick leave buyback benefits, and work rule changes, among other things.

Additionally, Ben has developed a niche practice at Clark Baird Smith LLP, counseling the firm's clients on a wide variety of wage and hour issues under both state and federal law. In addition to handling the traditional wage payment questions that arise with private sector businesses, Ben is skilled at answering questions that are unique to the public sector, such as questions about compensatory time, 7(k) work periods, pay for canine handlers, and duty shift trades, to name a few.

Ben was selected to the 2016 Illinois Rising Stars list. Only 2.5% of all attorneys in the State of Illinois were selected.

## *Christy George*

**President and CEO  
Intersect Illinois**

Christy George is the President and Chief Executive Officer of Intersect Illinois, a public private partnership focused on global business development for the State of Illinois. She oversees all aspects of the organization, including marketing, sales, financing, and personnel.

Most recently, Christy served as Executive Director of the Chicago 2024 Host Committee for the Democratic National Convention. In this role, she oversaw the Host Committee's successful fundraising and civic engagement efforts, and served as the primary liaison between the Democratic National Convention Committee, the City of Chicago, and the State of Illinois to create a world-class experience for all convention attendees and residents.

Before leading the Host Committee, she served as First Assistant Deputy Governor for Budget & Economy in Illinois Governor JB Pritzker's office. During her time in the Governor's Office, she spearheaded the state's business attraction and engagement efforts, led on workforce development priorities, crafted the Reimagining Energy & Vehicles (REV) Act, and oversaw the operations of

multiple state agencies, boards, and commissions. Before joining the Governor's Office, Christy served as the Executive Director of the Illinois Commerce Commission and several roles at the City of Chicago including Deputy Budget Director for Public Safety, Assistant Commissioner at the Department of Business Affairs & Consumer Protection, and Assistant Corporation Counsel in the Department of Law.

Christy obtained her J.D. at Loyola University Chicago School of Law and her undergraduate degree from Ohio Wesleyan University. A native Californian, she currently lives in the Beverly-Morgan Park neighborhood of Chicago with her husband and daughters.

## *Erik Hansen*

**Vice President  
Heitman LLC**

Erik Hansen, CFA, has a diverse work experience spanning various industries and roles. Erik started their career in 2007 as an intern at the U.S. Department of State, working in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs. In 2008, they joined the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET) as an English Teacher, where they stayed until 2010.

In 2012, Erik interned at the U.S. Department of the Treasury in the South and Southeast Asian Affairs department. Later in 2013, they had another internship at The World Bank, specifically at the International Finance Corporation.

In the same year, Erik also joined Morgan Stanley as an Analyst in the Fixed Income Controllers division. Erik stayed at Morgan Stanley until 2016. During this time, they gained valuable experience in financial analysis and management.

From 2016 to 2017, Erik worked as an Associate in Research & Consultancy at Savills, focusing on real estate research.

Currently, Erik is at Heitman, where they have held several positions since 2018. Erik started as a Senior Associate in Investment Research and later became an Assistant Vice President in the same department. Currently, they serve as a Vice President, leading the Investment Research team. Throughout their career, Erik has demonstrated expertise in research, finance, and management contributing to the success of the organizations they have worked for.

Erik holds a Master of Arts (MA) degree in International Finance and International Law from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), which they obtained from 2011 to 2013. Prior to that, they completed their Bachelor of Arts (BA) in English Literature at the University of Virginia from 2004 to 2008. In August 2017, Erik obtained the Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) Charterholder certification from the CFA Institute.

# *Thomas Walstrum*

## **Principal Business Economist Chicago Federal Reserve**

Thomas Walstrum is a principal business economist in the economic research department at the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago. His responsibilities include the Seventh District's contribution to the [Beige Book](#), the [Chicago Fed Survey of Economic Conditions](#), and briefings for the Chicago Fed president on Seventh District economic conditions. He also is a contributing author to the Bank's [Chicago Fed Insights](#) article series.

Thomas holds a B.A. in economics from Wheaton College, Illinois, and a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Illinois at Chicago, with concentrations in labor and urban and regional economics.

# *Mike Wojcik*

## **Executive Vice President & Shareholder The Horton Group**

Mike Wojcik is Executive Vice President and Shareholder of The Horton Group, one of the largest privately held, multiline insurance agencies specializing in Insurance, Risk Advisory, and Employee Benefits. He joined Horton in 1989 as one of the founding partners of the benefit brokerage and consulting division. His leadership and innovative drive have helped the division earn continuous growth and gained Mike recognition as a thought leader in the industry.

Mike earned his bachelor's degree from Roosevelt University and an MBA from Lewis University. He received his Certified Financial Planner® (CFP®) designation from the American College and is a Chartered Life Underwriter (CLU). Mike most recently received a Group Benefits Associate (GBA) designation through the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans at the Wharton University of Pennsylvania. Mike also has a Professional Certificate in Public Finance from the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy. To round out Mike's health care perspective, he serves on several insurance carrier and related industry advisory boards.

At the national level, Mike is regarded as an industry expert. He is the Chair of the Big 'I' National Health Care Task Force in Washington D.C. which supports government affairs efforts on health care legislation. The Big "I" is a national association of more than 250,000 insurance agents. Mike also serves on the Legislative Council of the National Association of Benefit and Insurance Professionals (NABIP, formerly NAHU) in Washington, D.C., which represents over 100,000 health benefit specialists who work diligently to ensure all Americans have access to high-quality, affordable health care