



MATT BENDA AND STEPHANIE HAEDT

Peterson, Kolker, Haedt & Benda



Matt Benda is a Circle of Excellence Attorney of the Year.

It took more than 12 years of a complicated process, but a project to dredge and improve Fountain Lake in Albert Lea finally launched in 2018. When the dredging operations began last summer, it marked a milestone in a grassroots effort to restore the quality of a 550-acre lake that is central to the identity of the city as a recreational asset.

It required the efforts of many people, but it's likely none were as critical to the success of the venture as Matt Benda and Stephanie Haedt, partners in the Albert Lea firm of Peterson, Kolker, Haedt & Benda.

The dredging project started as a vision of the Shell Rock Watershed District and, as it began to take shape, the law firm took on the role of legal counsel. The project had strong local support — more than 80 percent of Albert Lea voters approved a 0.5 percent local-option sales tax to fund it — but

it required intensive, ongoing legal work involving many jurisdictions to bring it to completion.

“This was a big commitment for us,” said Benda. “It was just an honor to be able to take a community vision, collaborating statewide, and seeing it through. As attorneys and as a law firm, it’s just been very rewarding and amazing to see the end product.”

Haedt, whose primary function was to oversee the development and drafting of the \$5.1 million dredging project’s massive, 2,500-page contract, had a similar reaction.

“I think it’s a true testament to what can be achieved when you put a vision together and everyone in the community comes together for a common purpose,” she said. “It’s been a great experience.”

—Dick Dahl

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