

Jeff Birdwell: pilot, a teacher, a sailor, a real estate dealmaker

[« Back to article](#)



Jeff Birdwell **Age:** 54 **Hometown:** Menlo Park **Birthplace:** Sacramento **Family:** Wife, three children **Education:** B.A., economics, Claremont McKenna College; undergraduate and graduate degrees in engineering at Stanford University.

Jeff Birdwell heads up the commercial division of Sares Regis Group of Northern California. In addition to developing millions of square feet of office and industrial buildings, he's an outspoken advocate for the region's waterways and Redwood City's Bair Island Aquatic Center, where he spends much of his free time.



SOCIAL CAPITAL

AT SEA WITH A REAL ESTATE MAN 27

You spend a lot of time on the water. Ever do a business deal on your boat?

I probably have. I organized a race, in rowing shells, between the Redwood City Council and planning commission. None had been in a boat before. They took up the challenge, and the sheriff ended up in one of the boats with one of the elected officials, and it allowed a relationship to come together that would not have happened otherwise.

Most perfect spot on the water in the Valley?

I could nail that one: a little waterway off the Corkscrew Slough that bisects Outer Bair Island in Redwood City. It's a little 1.2 kilometer-long stretch of water that almost no one knows about. It's magical out there. You could be in Africa were it not for the power lines and some houses in the distance. It didn't even exist on the city's maps until we named it the North Passage.

How do you convince politicians and other stakeholders to get out on the water with you?

I've probably done 200 trips on the water over the last 10 years. The only time I had trouble was when an elected official was afraid of the water. We overcame that, and the official was really touched by being able to see the world from the water side. It tends to change people's views of living on the Peninsula and being here when they do come out.

Who would you most want to be on the water with in a boat with no oars?

My wife and kids. I have three unbelievably spectacular kids. Our garage is a lab for our kids. We do a ton of things in the DIY world and the Maker Faire. We've done hovercrafts and icosahedrons and gas-to-electric go-karts. We iterate at a frenetic level at home with the kids.

You're also a licensed pilot. Any nerve-wracking moments?

There have been a couple, but that's what you train for. I once had a significant mechanical failure where the plane jumped the red line instantaneously. I discovered that by bringing the throttle back, I could get the RPM out of red line. I diverted to another airport within about a 10- or 15-minute flight, and was able to maintain altitude above the mountains. I didn't declare an emergency. I called the tower and said I had a rough-running engine and asked for expedited handling. Unbeknownst to me, they rolled out all their emergency equipment.

Your first job was a union laborer on a demolition job.

From 2 a.m. to 10 a.m., doing demolition on an I. Magnin store in Sherman Oaks. The store was open for business and we were adding three floors to it.

Favorite deal you've been involved in?

When we acquired the Cemex property for Redwood City, which is where the aquatics facility is today. It helped secure the long-term future of the community resource. It was complex. It had been in contract for \$8 million, and we were able to buy it for just a touch over \$4 million. It was probably the second public-sector deal I was involved in.

Dream architect to work with?

Bill Valentine, the retired chairman of HOK. He was such an amazing guy to work with. We probably did millions of square feet together, including 601 California Avenue in Palo Alto, the Wilson Sonsini headquarters, which was our first project together. We're each other's biggest fans.

Best tech campus that you've worked on?

Probably the Electronic Arts campus in Redwood City, which really at the time was very pioneering. We did the big building with a 77,000-square-foot floorplate. That's the floorplate that broke the paradigm and recognized horizontal connectivity. It was done really sensibly, but really well designed. It was really cool to be a part of that.

You also teach at Stanford. How'd that happen?

I took Real Estate Development, CEE 248, about 30 years ago, taught by one of the founders of Silicon Valley Bank, Bob Medearis. I said, 'Wow, isn't that cool someone would come back and teach. Maybe I should do that someday.' Years later, someone at the faculty at Stanford contacted me and said, 'Hey, Bob's retiring, do you want to teach?' Now there's four of us who team-teach the class.

I hear you're not a fan of email.

I kind of hate email. To me, face-to-face meetings are the absolute best. I'm a bit of a storyteller, and I see that linkage in development, communicating and telling stories and trying to find something that connects you to people.

Nathan Donato-Weinstein covers commercial real estate and transportation for the Silicon Valley Business Journal.