

Pittsburgh Market Stays Hot for Out-of-Town Firms

The Legal Intelligencer (Online)

September 7, 2017 Thursday

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The Legal Intelligencer

Length: 706 words

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Body

Three out-of-town law firms-Porter Wright Morris & Arthur, Spilman Thomas & Battle and Cozen O'Connor-entered or expanded in the Pittsburgh market as the summer came to a close, keeping up the city's momentum as a hub for lateral hiring and law firm growth.

Porter Wright, a 190-lawyer Am Law 200 firm based in Ohio, opened a Steel City office, bringing on former K&L Gates partner Ellen Freeman to lead it. Freeman has an employment-based immigration practice. She launched the Porter Wright outpost with an associate and a few staffers, with plans to build out a full-service office.

Before joining K&L Gates in 2010, Freeman had a counsel position at Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney, and she was earlier an associate at Cohen & Grigsby. While she has a long history at Pittsburgh-based firms, she said she does not expect to feel much different working at a firm headquartered elsewhere.

"When you worked at K&L, you would never have felt that it was a Pittsburgh-based firm," she said. "I have a lot of clients all over the country and the world. ... I don't feel that the practice of law anymore is just local."

Still, she said, Pittsburgh is a place where "you have to be from here to get business here," so it's good for her firm to have a local presence. And given its lower rates compared to bigger cities and the availability of affordable support staff, it's not a bad place to open up shop, she said.

"It's exploded over the past 10 years," Freeman said. "If the market continues to perform as well as it has been, we'll see even more entrepreneurs who want to stay here."

That will mean growth in the foreign-born community, she said, which is good news for her immigration practice. Porter Wright is aiming to add other practices to the Pittsburgh office as well, she said.

"We don't have a specific mandate. It's more about the talent," she said.

A spokesman for K&L Gates declined to comment on Freeman's departure.

Beefing Up

Another out-of-state firm, West Virginia's Spilman Thomas, recently brought on two litigators to its Pittsburgh office, pulling from local firm Pietragallo, Gordon, Alfano, Bosick & Raspanti. Bryan Neft and Robert Leight, who had been partners at Pietragallo Gordon, both joined Spilman late in August. Neft is also the president-elect of the Allegheny County Bar Association.

"The toxic tort practice that Bryan and Bob have complements the strength of the firm," said Ron Schuler, Spilman's member in charge of the Pittsburgh office. Spilman has lawyers doing similar work in West Virginia, he said, and putting boots on the ground in Pittsburgh will be helpful.

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In addition to toxic tort work, Neft is also a commercial litigator, and Leight, a former federal prosecutor, has a white-collar criminal defense practice.

Neft said he and Leight were looking for a firm that was more compatible with their practice area, and they expect to expand the toxic tort practice along with their West Virginia colleagues. Spilman has more processes "automated" than he was used to at Pietragallo, Neft said, and has systems in place to make collaboration between offices "more seamless."

Pietragallo Gordon co-founder and partner William Pietragallo wished the two lawyers well, and said his firm is "as strong and focused as ever."

Cozen O'Connor also added a partner in Pittsburgh, the firm announced Tuesday, bringing on a former associate general counsel for the University of Pittsburgh. Cozen O'Connor has rapidly grown its presence in Pittsburgh since opening an office in the city in May.

Alan Pittler, now part of the firm's expanding labor and employment practice, spent the past nine years at University of Pittsburgh, and was a partner at Buchanan Ingersoll before that. Cozen O'Connor had recruited many of its Pittsburgh lawyers from Buchanan, some of whom previously worked with Pittler.

"Alan's broad background in all aspects of traditional labor and employment law, combined with his experience at University of Pittsburgh, will make him an invaluable resource to our clients, especially those in the higher education industry," said Tom Giotto, a Pittsburgh partner and co-chairman of the labor and employment practice.

Cozen O'Connor now has 19 lawyers in Pittsburgh, according to the firm's website.

Load-Date: September 8, 2017

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