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Cohen Seglias Forms Three New Practice Groups Firm Names First Practice Head Based Outside Phila.



John A. Greenhall



Manning J. "Jim"
O'Connor

Philadelphia-based Cohen Seglias Pallas Greenhall & Furman has made strides recently to expand its presence beyond that of a construction law boutique.

The latest in those moves finds the firm more clearly defining its commercial litigation, transactional and creditors' rights practices, all of which were previously contained under the firm's

business practice group, by separating each into its own practice area.

"We saw a need to have more individualized practice group management of each, with each having their own individual marketing plans," said John A. Greenhall, the firmwide managing partner.

The firm has assigned three of its existing partners to oversee the growth of the new groups and, in doing so, has also established its first practice head based outside of its home office.

Manning J. "Jim" O'Connor II, managing partner of the firm's Pittsburgh office, has been named chairman of the firm's commercial litigation group, which will include all non-construction litigation and insurance coverage issues.

O'Connor joined the firm in January from Pittsburgh-based Leech Tishman Fuscaldo & Lampl, along with a partner and an associate from that firm, a director from Cohen & Grigsby and an associate from Pepper Hamilton, more than doubling Cohen Seglias' Pittsburgh office.

"We've really seen his management skills come to the forefront and we felt he could handle the management responsibilities [of leading a practice]," Greenhall said.

O'Connor said the firm's willingness to appoint a practice head outside of its headquarters "enables me to say to clients that this firm has made a commitment to this area and isn't just a Philadelphia firm with a bunch of satellite offices that are just used as staffing stations for large cases."

According to O'Connor, his practice has continued to grow over the past five years, with employment litigation, in particular, increasing since the recession began.

Meanwhile, Marian A. Kornilowicz, who co-chaired the business practice group in the firm's Philadelphia office, will head up the new transactional group, which will comprise the firm's existing corporate, real estate, wealth preservation, nonprofit and health care practices.

The firm picked Steven D. Usdin, who is also based in Philadelphia, to helm the firm's creditors' rights group, which will include the firm's existing bankruptcy practice.

Greenhall said those decisions were easy since Kornilowicz is a longtime transactional lawyer with the firm and Usdin is "one of the deans of the bankruptcy bar."

Greenhall framed the restructuring of those three practices as a precursor to bulking up each with additional hires in the near future.

According to Greenhall, the firm singled out commercial litigation, transactional and creditors' rights as growth areas because all three have seen an uptick in the amount of work coming in recently.

The last year-and-a-half has seen an increase in bankruptcy cases for obvious reasons, according to Greenhall, but perhaps more surprising is the rise in corporate transactional and even real estate work the firm has experienced in 2010 thus far.

Kornilowicz said the firm's transactional practice managed to keep busy during the economic downturn by focusing on "circle-the-wagons, work-out stuff."

But over the last four months, he said, the practice has started to see more new corporate and real estate deals happening.

"We're seeing more banks issuing commitment letters and more clients going to closings on the new deals," he said.

According to Kornilowicz, who helped the firm form its business practice group after he joined in 2000, Cohen Seglias has long struggled to overcome the "image issue" of being viewed solely as a construction law firm.

The formation of the business practice group was part of the firm's original attempt to solve that problem, he said.

"We started off with the business practice group and our client base was our construction clients who needed work outside the realm of construction," he said.

But as the firm continued to grow, adding attorneys with more diverse client books, "all of a sudden our client base came less and less from the construction side and more and more from the outside world," Kornilowicz said.

In July, Cohen Seglias formed an affiliation with nine-lawyer Maryland firm Treanor Pope & Hughes, bringing corporate transactional, utility and regulatory and class action litigation defense capabilities to the firm.

Greenhall said the Treanor Pope affiliation and the decision to bring a more individual focus to its commercial litigation, transactional and creditors' rights practices represent attempts by the firm not only to diversify itself, but also to market its practice diversity more effectively.

"What we try to do is add these synergistic practice groups and synergistic offices," he said. "When we expanded into Maryland, we saw the ability to increase construction work in the Maryland-Delaware area, but also to introduce new practice areas not only to [our existing] clients but to the marketplace."

Usdin said the goal is to "show the public and the business community that we have the ability to handle these diverse areas."

Still, the firm, which began in 1988 as a construction boutique, has no intention of abandoning the foundation upon which it was built, according to O'Connor.

"I think the firm has committed to expanding other practice areas without shrinking its construction practice," he said. "This is definitely a growth vision for the firm." •