

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin

Volume 155, No. 217

Thursday, November 5, 2009

Forty-six pages in two sections

More big fish swimming in smaller tanks

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At least a dozen partners in Chicago's biggest law firms have moved to mid-sized and smaller firms in recent months, including five in the last six weeks — often to give their clients a break on fees.

"I think mid-sized and smaller firms offer rate relief, and many clients are focused on rate relief right now," said legal recruiter John A. Cashman of Major, Lindsey & Africa.

Freeborn & Peters, with 120 lawyers, has recruited three lateral partners from Chicago's biggest firms this year.

And this week, Quarles & Brady, with 450 lawyers, announced that Theodore I. Yi joined as a partner in its real estate practice group.

Yi came from from the ultimate

mega- firm, DLA Piper, which has 3,500 lawyers.

Intellectual property lawyer Michael A. Parks jumped from Kirkland & Ellis, with 1,500 lawyers, to Thompson, Coburn, with 360 lawyers, on Oct. 16.

"Law firms like Thompson, Coburn are providing high-quality legal services at a rate that is realistic, given current economic constraints clients are facing," Parks said Thursday. "The move gave me the opportunity to significantly reduce my hourly rate."

Parks added: "I have a lot more control over my practice now. I'm charged with helping develop and grow the IP practice in Chicago."

Cashman said: "Many of the mid-sized and smaller firms see the current economic environment as an opportunity to grab talent that they didn't have access to

12 or 24 months ago."

Michael A. Moynihan, chairman of the recruiting committee at Freeborn & Peters, said the firm has hired six lateral partners in the last nine months. The firm may hire a similar number through the first quarter of 2011, he said.

"They all have their own sort of personal tipping point issues," Moynihan said.

"I think virtually everybody I've interviewed in the past year" has said they "feel handicapped in marketing because of rate pressure" at their firms of origin.

Among Freeborn's lateral hires this year from Chicago's biggest firms are: James A. Boland, a commercial litigator who came from Kirkland & Ellis; Dov J. Pinchot, real estate leasing, from DLA Piper; and Todd R. Southwell, mergers and acquisitions and private equity, from

Latham & Watkins.

"For us," Moynihan said, "the downturn has ended up to be a bit of a benefit because quite a few companies are looking for a different rate scale. They want the same big firm service but a better rate structure, essentially what we always sold.

"We hear a lot that systemic conflicts are becoming a problem, an obstacle to marketing."

Laterals from the biggest firms tell him they are "running into conflict issues too often" because of their law firm's size.

Other Big Law partners who moved to mid-sized or smaller firms in Chicago in recent months include:

- Joan L. Long, who moved from Mayer, Brown to Barnes & Thornburg on Oct. 13.

- Mark A. Gershon, who moved from DLA Piper to Polsinelli, Shughart on Sept. 23.

- Timothy J. McCaffrey, who moved from Winston & Strawn to Pircher, Nichols & Meeks on Aug. 24.

- Blaine C. Kimrey, who moved from Sonnenschein, Nath & Rosenthal to Lath-

rop & Gage on July 20.

- N. Neville Reid, who moved from Mayer, Brown to Fox, Hefter, Swibel, Levin & Carroll on May 26.

- Sang-Yul Lee, who moved from Seyfarth, Shaw to Polsinelli on March 5.