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Pannone Lopes Devereaux & West Celebrates Its 5th Anniversary with Continued Growth

By Chris Miller
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Teno A. West, Partner

With unemployment falling to 8.9 percent in February, the economy seems to be gaining some momentum. Although 192,000 jobs have been created in general during the month of February, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the legal industry lost 2,900 during that time. However, the full-service law firm of Pannone Lopes Devereaux & West, celebrating its fifth anniversary this month, has proved to be the exception with an increase in attorney and staff hires and an expansion of practice areas.

Adjusted January numbers of the BLS report showed that the legal industry actually gained 500 jobs that month - a small increase that is overshadowed by the 900 and 1,600 legal industry job losses in November and December respectively. Since its inception in March 2006, Pannone Lopes Devereaux & West (PLDW) have been recognized for its unique business model and business operations insight, which has led to an increase from 7 employees in 2006 to over 50 employees in 2011.

PLDW partner Teno West noted the firm has expanded to 13 practice areas, including Alternative Dispute Resolution, Corporate & Business Counseling, Criminal Defense, Employment, Estate Planning & Administration, Government & Legislative Strategies, Health Care, litigation, Municipal Infrastructure, Nonprofit Organizations, Real Estate

& Commercial Lending and Special Masterships and Sports. In 2010, PLDW was named a US News Best Law Firms "best law firm" in America in a metropolitan area in four practice areas.

"I lead the team in municipal infrastructure, which is my practice expertise. It's a niche practice at the firm," he added. "My clients are all from local governments, counties, towns, public authorities, cities, and primarily with water & sewer and waste projects."

PLDW has grown from four partners in 2006 to five partners in 2009. All five have gained their experience and expertise working for larger firms. West said that the partners' 125 plus years of legal experience allows them to provide services in the same manner as the larger firms, which is the leading factor in their success.

The financial challenges of the economy has required the partners to think outside the box while practicing within its successful business model and "one firm" concept. West said the decision has proven to be timely in a struggling economic environment and it enabled the firm to react to business opportunities while other firms stumbled along with the economy. The latest BLS report stated that, overall, the legal industry lost 1,300 jobs between February 2010 and February 2011.

"We're structured to deliver large firm expertise and business consulting that is cost-sensitive, which is important in these economic times," he said. According to West, in his practice, especially, hourly rates could be an issue when dealing with local governments. With offices in West Hartford, CT, Boston, MA, Providence, RI, Albany, NY, White Plains, NY, New York, NY, Miami Beach, FL and a new location in Boca Raton, PLDW utilizes the resources they have at their disposal that allows them to provide to the need of their clients. West said he would never turn away a client based on their rate sensitivity, noting that a compensation for service arrangement could be made.

"By employing a more efficient platform with quality lawyers, the firm has the ability to pursue legal work in all the markets it serves at a pricing model that is more affordable and cost-effective for clients," he said. "We can implement an hourly rate or other compensation arrangements that works for the client."

PLDW has been referred to as the firm that's setting a precedent for being nimble and client-oriented, and was cited as being able to adapt to the new economy by being more entrepreneurial. In 2011, the firm has founded the PLDW Nonprofit Center of Excellence - a collaborative initiative with specialists outside the legal industry to serve the nonprofit community in capacity building. PLDW is also a member of several local business and community organizations in the locations where they have offices, including those in New York.

"We have a strong community involvement in Providence and Massachusetts where some of the partners are located," explained West. "Now that we're really focusing on our New York efforts in the White Plains office we'll be getting more involved with community groups in The White Plains and Westchester area." Aside from legal groups and bar associations, he cited Chambers of Commerce, United Way, and many local business associations as the community organizations with which PLDW has become involved.

West stated that many of his projects are public-private partnerships, such as the Rockland County design-build-operate project where he is lead attorney. He noted the importance for the public sector to consider the private sector in collaborating or coordinating resources and expertise, especially in the current economy.

"In Rockland County, we're involved in the Western Ramapo Sewer Extension Project, which is the construction of a new advanced wastewater treatment plant, as well as the sewer systems. That was done with a public-private partnership," he said of the first water reuse project of its kind in New York. "In that type of arrangement, you're getting the private companies with the expertise to provide the service to design, build and operate the plant with a more cost-efficient manner as well as more certainty in the pricing." West said he also working with the Town of Poughkeepsie to assist them with the privatization process of their wastewater plant.

Before he began his law career in 1993, West garnered experience with municipal infrastructure projects while holding the position of town manager in Vermont and Massachusetts.

"I was responsible for managing the affairs of the town in both of those communities and what was interesting was that I spent a lot of my time on water & sewer and solid waste," he recalled. "Roads, police and fire are more interesting to people. It's hard to hold their attention with water, sewer and garbage."

West's transition from town manager to municipal infrastructure attorney was a natural progression. He said that his experience as town manager for two municipalities started him off early in his legal career with the appreciation of what it was to be a client. Holding the former position also helps him manage change as a lead attorney in municipal infrastructure projects that require more creativity and cost-effectiveness.

PLDW offers the basic legal disciplines in combination with specialty practice areas. When seeking the services of an attorney, West said it important to find a firm with the expertise required and one with which an ongoing relationship could be built.

"You really have to have trust with your lawyer so you could work together as a team," he expressed. "Each of PLDW's partners has a specialty, such as Criminal and civil litigation, construction and labor and employment, social masters and government relations, municipal infrastructure, and corporate. Each one of us has a distinct practice expertise within our 13 practice areas."