

PROVIDENCE BUSINESS NEWS

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Municipal Water-treatment Projects Increasingly Complex



Lawyer Teno A. West didn't take the direct route on his career path.

After obtaining a master's of public administration, he served several years as town manager and town administrator in two New England communities. Only then did he get his law degree. The experience of running a municipality has been

crucial in his law practice focusing on the legal issues surrounding municipal infrastructure projects, such as water-treatment plants and solid-waste projects.

Now West has joined Providence-based Pannone Lopes Devereaux & West LLC as a partner. At a time when larger firms are experiencing declining revenues, Pannone Lopes Devereaux & West — which formed in March 2006 — says it has been growing.

PBN: What led you to switch gears and go from operating local governments to advising them on specific legal issues?

WEST: I was very interested when I was a town manager in various legal issues that would come up. When I was going to law school as a town administrator, I thought I would continue as a local government manager and just have a law degree. But then when I got into law school, I got bitten by the law bug and decided to be an attorney. My whole practice is representing local government, so my clients are towns, cities, local authorities. Also, I represent these communities primar-

ily with water, sewer [and] solid-waste matters. When I was a town administrator, I spent much of my time dealing with solid-waste, water [and] wastewater issues.

PBN: Have you had any local clients?

WEST: I'm working on a project for the city of Taunton, and the city of Braintree, Mass. I've represented communities all over Massachusetts. ... We're looking to do some work in Rhode Island also.

PBN: What type of legal work are you doing?

WEST: I have a Northeast region practice, but also a national practice representing local governments in the development of new water plants, wastewater systems [and] solid-waste systems. I'm currently working on a conversion-technology, solid-waste project in Taunton. It's a technology where you're converting the waste into energy, not through combustion. ... I'm beginning to do a similar project for Los Angeles County.

PBN: Why would a municipality need to retain an attorney to handle water-treatment and solid-waste projects? It sounds like they need someone with more technical knowledge.

WEST: The projects I tend to do are what I call alternative-delivery projects. They are not necessarily undertaken through your traditional public works

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process, where it's 100 percent designed by the city's engineer, then put out to the lowest responsible bidder, then operated by the city. These are projects that have complexities. They tend to be projects where cities are looking to deliver the services through an alternative approach, more of a public-private partnership. ... The legal issues can be vast.

PBN: Is this a practice area in which a lot of other lawyers are involved?

WEST: There are probably a handful of people in the Northeast and around the country who focus their practice in this area.

PBN: If this is such a specialized field, why join a law firm? Why not strike out on our own?

WEST: You need the support of other practice areas. We have labor lawyers, construction lawyers, corporate-finance attorneys. ... You need that to deal with the full range of issue that can arise in these projects. There's also the camaraderie.

PBN: The American Lawyer's annual rankings show that many of the larger law firms nationwide are experiencing declining revenue, while smaller firms have generally performed relatively well in the recession. What's going on?

WEST: I think clients look to the attorneys representing them; they look at the capabilities of the firm. ... The way the market is now, clients expect a high level of legal representation, but there are also issues with hourly rates and overall cost of legal services. In a smaller firm, we're all working together for the same goal. I think we can provide the services in a more efficient, effective manner.

All my clients typically being local governments, there's always concern about controlling costs. In a smaller environment, it's more manageable.

PBN: Has the \$787 billion federal stimulus package helped matters?

WEST: It hasn't directly yet, but I think it will. I may be retained and directly involved in stimulus-funded

projects, and there's such a focus on infrastructure development, that even if a project may not be completely driven by stimulus funds, momentum can be driven by all the infrastructure talk.

With some clients, I find that not only are they looking for stimulus funding, but they're also undertaking their own stimulus programs. Some communities are doing projects just to jump-start their own local economies.

PBN: Now that you're a partner in a Rhode Island-based firm, do you plan to focus attention on attracting clients in the Ocean State?

WEST: There are water issues, wastewater projects in Rhode Island. There are solid-waste issues. I do a tremendous amount of solid-waste work and those issues are everywhere right now. I'm focused on reaching out to potential clients in Rhode Island. The projects I'd be looking to do in Rhode Island are ones I've done in other parts of the country. •

INTERVIEW: Teno A. West

POSITION: Partner at Pannone Lopes Devereaux & West LLC

BACKGROUND: West has been a partner at Pannone Lopes Devereaux & West since February, arriving from Holland & Knight, where he first worked out of the Providence office in 2004, then moved to the New York office. He had previously been a partner at Hawkins Delafield & Wood LLP. Before obtaining a law degree in 1993, he was town administrator in Carlisle, Mass., and town manager of Harwick, Vt.

EDUCATION: B.A. in political science and American studies, 1984, St. Michael's College, Winooski, Vt.; M.P.A., 1987, University of Vermont, Burlington; J.D., 1993, New England School of Law, Boston.

FIRST JOB: Yard work for an elderly couple in his neighborhood at age 12.

RESIDENCE: West Hartford, Conn.

AGE: 47