

Gunster plans to expand in-state with experienced lawyers

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JACKSONVILLE — While growth at many law firms in Jacksonville is expected to remain stagnant this year, executives at **Gunster, Yoakley & Stewart**'s Jacksonville office hope to double the number of attorneys and expand the areas of practice.

The Jacksonville office of Gunster grew by 12 percent firmwide in 2011 and more than doubled the number of attorneys in Jacksonville to 23 attorneys. The Jacksonville office is also completing an expansion to take the entire 17th floor of One Enterprise Center at 225 Water St.

The Jacksonville attorneys specialize in business litigation, real estate and construction law, land use and private wealth services.

[Bill Adams](#), one of the lead litigators, said the office would like to expand into corporate and transactional work, labor/employment and health care law. The rest of the executive team in Jacksonville is actively looking for experienced attorneys in those areas.

“You identify where you want to go and identify those people instead of just hiring people,” Adams said of Gunster’s expansion business model.

Based in West Palm Beach, Gunster was considered a South Florida law firm until deciding to grow statewide by opening an office in Tallahassee and Jacksonville in 2007. The Jacksonville office opened with four attorneys, two of whom were from the **McGuireWoods LLP** firm.

Most of the growth at the office since then has been from strategically hiring attorneys with deep roots in the community, Adams said. Among Gunster’s most recent new hires were the 10 attorneys from the longtime Jacksonville firm of **Pappas Metcalf Jenks & Miller PA** in October and three attorneys from Ivan, Cole, Bonnette & Kane in November.

Gunster is one of Florida's oldest and largest law firms with 182 attorneys. The firm has also continued to grow throughout the recession and the recovery by following the same growth strategy. Last year, it opened its ninth office in the state in Tampa. That office opened with nine attorneys who left a law firm called **Ruden McClosky**, which was in Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

Gunster board member [David Wells](#) said the firm will continue to grow the Tampa, Tallahassee and Miami offices in 2012, as well. The one move the firm will not make is outside of the state.

"There's a strategic advantage for us to stay in Florida to represent Florida businesses," Wells said. "We want to stay Florida-focused."

Growth has been difficult for most law firms in Jacksonville since the recession. The number of lawyers in the Jacksonville area has dropped 22.7 percent from 2,600 in May 2007 to 2,010 in May 2010, according to the **Bureau of Labor Statistics**. Comparatively, the number increased 7.2 percent statewide from 38,480 to 41,240 during the same period.



Bill Adams is a shareholder at Gunster. He said the office would like to expand into health care law, among other specialties

[Mike Freed](#), the president of the **Jacksonville Bar Association** and the Florida managing partner at **Brennan, Manna and Diamond LLC**, said historically, law firms that expand into Jacksonville find better success when they tap into the existing legal community.

"It certainly maximizes your ability to be successful by being aligned with practitioners who have already experienced success in our legal community," Freed said.

Freed noted that his own law firm, as well as others that have expanded into Jacksonville, grew in a similar fashion to Gunster.

The Jacksonville office of GrayRobinson PA opened in 2004 with five attorneys who all formerly worked for the independent firm of Edwards, Cohen, Jacobs, Haramis & Burnett PA. [Ken Jacobs](#), the managing partner at GrayRobinson, who was among the original five, said the Jacksonville office has since grown to 19 attorneys. Much of GrayRobinson's growth has come from hiring attorneys from existing law firms in Jacksonville such as **Akerman Senterfitt LLP**; **Rogers Towers PA**; and Coffman, Coleman, Andrews & Grogan. Most recently, the law firm hired [Reese Henderson](#), who was a shareholder at the former Tritt|Henderson, which is now known as Tritt|Renzio, and [Jason Campbell](#) from **Fowler White Boggs**.

Like Gunster, Orlando-based GrayRobinson has had to expand its office space in Jacksonville too, going from a quarter of the 11th floor to taking the entire 11th floor of the Bank of America Tower.

Christian Conte covers banking and finance, insurance, retail and restaurants and law