

Gunster law firm sets its sights on Tampa and Orlando

BY PAUL BRINKMANN

The Gunster law firm is among a few law South Florida practices that have reported growth, despite the recent real estate market collapse and recession. The firm has major offices in Miami, Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach, Jacksonville and Tallahassee, with smaller offices in Vero Beach, Stuart and Palm Beach. Gunster also is one of the few larger South Florida firms to be based in West Palm Beach.



Perry

The firm ranked sixth on the Business Journals list of the region's largest law firms. Chairman H. William Perry recently talked about Gunster's growth and plans for expansion.

SFBJ: What kind of expansion have you seen?

Perry: We are growing reasonably well, given the economy. While other firms are contracting, we have grown. In the last few years, we've gone from 120 to 160 attorneys. Our goal is to get to 200 to 250, which would put us among the top Florida-only firms in the state. At this point, I think we'd be No. 3 on the Business Journal's list of the largest firms in South Florida.

SFBJ: What are the targeted markets for expansion?

Perry: Tampa and Orlando are the big new markets we're trying to enter. To be the best Florida-only firm, we have to be in those two markets. And we want to see more growth in

Miami, Jacksonville and Tallahassee. We're meeting with lawyers in those communities and trying to find the right fit. We've talked to several already, such as Williams Schifino Mangione & Steady, P.A. in Tampa.

SFBJ: Why are you growing?

Perry: We didn't grow as quickly as some firms in the boom years. Because of that, we've been more stable maybe, so we didn't have to contract as much. That's been a struggle for many other Florida law firms. We go to the major Florida law schools [to recruit] and we still have a summer associate program. There are a lot of talented graduates out there, and they can be part of our future 10 years from now. A lot of firms have cut that off entirely, and I think that's a big mistake.

SFBJ: What areas are driving the growth?

Perry: Litigation is obviously an area with growth right now, along with our private wealth group, the real estate corporate group and our tax practice. There are a lot of workouts and what I would call distressed buys. Since 2010, that's been on an upswing. I think, from what I am hearing out there, that the Florida real estate market is starting to stabilize. People are starting to buy and sell homes. Hopefully, there will be some real growth in the next year.

SFBJ: Who is behind the decision to expand?

Perry: We have a growth-based plan that all the partners unanimously adopted in 2007. My job is to execute that plan. The economy has caused us to rethink the speed and velocity of what we're doing, but we haven't varied the intent of the plan.

SFBJ: Did the economy force any cuts?

Perry: We made some prudent decisions on the expenses side. We didn't have pay cuts and we didn't have mass layoffs. We looked hard at controlling expenses, such as rents and salaries.

SFBJ: How important has the firm's relationship with U.S. Sen. George LeMieux been?

Perry: George, when he was with us, was a tremendous asset. He's a great lawyer. He's a U.S. senator now and doing what he believes is best for the people of Florida. We are certainly proud of that.

SFBJ: Is the firm growing its government relations practice?

Perry: Government relations is starting to be a big focus, but we're not known for that yet. Our growth has mostly been in transactions and litigation. In the future, maybe we'll be more well known for that.

SFBJ: Gunster has secured some contract work with the state. How important has that been?

Perry: Like all big firms, we've done some work from the state, but the state is a client, so we don't talk about that unless we get their permission.

SFBJ: Is Gunster doing anything really innovative or different?

Perry: Sticking with the summer associate program, investing in young people – I think that is unique in this market. Our focus on being Florida only also defines us.