

Business planning

By Jean Gruss | Editor/Lee-Collier - Friday, October 11, 2013

Like other large Midwest-based law firms, Hahn Loeser & Parks followed their snowbird clients to warmer climes.

When the firm established an office in Naples 10 years ago with two attorneys, it was natural for the firm's business in Southwest Florida to be principally trust-and-estate planning for wealthy retirees.

But since its arrival in Southwest Florida, Hahn Loeser discovered that the area needed more lawyers versed in business law. As a result, Hahn Loeser now has 15 attorneys in Naples and another four in Fort Myers.

For example, Jeanne Seewald, the managing partner of Hahn Loeser's Southwest Florida offices, is co-chair of the firm's corporate transactions group and is well known for her specialty in intellectual property law. Jeffrey Folkman, a partner in Naples, is chair of the firm's taxation and employee benefits group.

"This is an underserved market," says Theodore Tripp Jr., the managing partner for Hahn Loeser's Fort Myers office and a commercial litigator.

Tripp says when he moved to Fort Myers in 1981, he could count the number of good commercial litigators on one hand. Today, that hasn't changed, he says. "That's always been a mystery to me," he says.

Fact is, many statewide and national firms have bypassed Fort Myers and Naples, believing that there isn't enough corporate work to warrant opening offices here. That's given local firms who specialize in this area a lock on the market.

Fortunately, Hahn Loeser's practice wasn't heavily invested in the business of real estate, so it avoided some of the challenges its competitors faced in that field during the downturn. Meanwhile, creditor rights, bankruptcy and litigation generated substantial business during the recession.

Tripp, who ran his own practice in Fort Myers, joined Hahn Loeser in 2008 so he could offer clients more assistance for increasingly complex cases at competitive rates. "It gave me an opportunity to provide a broader source of services," says Tripp. "As a small firm, I didn't have the ability to bring that expertise."

While Tripp had a well-established clientele in Fort Myers, Hahn Loeser's corporate business in Naples evolved from the firm's estate-planning clients. "The folks who retire to Southwest Florida are very motivated," says Seewald.

Many retirees to Naples have previously run companies, and when they move to Southwest Florida, they acquire local businesses, form partnerships and provide capital for startups, Seewald says.

As the economic recovery moves ahead, Seewald says she's witnessed an increase in commercial transactions.

“My clients are very positive,” she says.

One area of particular strength is the health care business. “A health care attorney is on my wish list,” Seewald says.

Hahn Loeser isn’t planning any big moves geographically, such as to Sarasota or Tampa. “Right now, we’re really focused on Naples and Fort Myers,” says Seewald. Hahn Loeser recently moved to larger offices in downtown Fort Myers near the new public library on First Street.