

Georgia Powerhouse: Dentons

By **Emily Sides**

Law360 (August 9, 2022, 2:02 PM EDT) --Atlanta-based Dentons attorneys guided local governments and companies over the past year, helping to defend the city of Atlanta against a proposed class action over its development of a recreational trail on a former railroad, and guided Tyler Perry Studios on negotiations to buy property to expand its Atlanta facility.

Among its many victories that led them to earn a spot among Law360's 2022 Georgia Powerhouses, Dentons attorneys notched a win for the city of Atlanta when it persuaded a three-judge Georgia Court of Appeals panel in December to find that there is not enough commonality among dozens of property owners along a section of the Atlanta BeltLine trail for collective claims of trespass and inverse condemnation against the trail's developers, affirming a lower court's ruling. The firm has about 60 attorneys based in Atlanta.

"[The trail has] been transformative to Atlanta, so to have a case that challenges aspects of that project is important, and we've been able to successfully defend Atlanta in that litigation," said R. Todd Silliman, Atlanta office managing partner.

Dentons attorneys have also advised Tyler Perry Studios on real estate, environmental and financing matters regarding the company's \$100 million acquisition in 2015 of former U.S. Army Base Fort McPherson and conversion of the property into a studio facility, Silliman said.

Tyler Perry Studios currently includes more than 300 acres in Atlanta including film sets, an office building, church, sports field, movie theater and golf course. Dentons has worked with the company since 2015, in part because the firm has expertise with Base Realignment and Closure, a U.S. Department of Defense process of reorganizing base structure that involves "elaborate statutory and regulatory requirements," Silliman said.

"What Tyler Perry has done out there, which includes building almost every type of set that you could imagine wanting, including an 80% replica of the White House, is really something," he added.

Leading From Expertise

Among the Atlanta office's attorneys are leaders like Jeffrey Haidet, chair for Dentons US, and multiple



leaders of national practices, such as Thurbert Baker, who served as Georgia's attorney general for 13 years and now co-leads the firm's state attorneys general practice. That practice also includes Samuel S. Olens, a public policy partner in Atlanta who is also a former attorney general for the state.

Other prominent attorneys and professionals in the office include Eric J. Tanenblatt, principal and global chair of public policy and regulation for the firm who splits his time between Atlanta and Washington, D.C., and Sharon Gay, Dentons public policy senior counsel who ran unsuccessfully last year for Atlanta mayor, garnering nearly 7% of the vote in November.

Silliman, who also serves as co-chair of the firm's U.S. environmental practice and leads a team of about 60 attorneys in the city, said that the office is known for having a forward-thinking approach.

"Within the firm, we are well-represented in the leadership of the firm at the board level and at the practice level," Silliman said. "We have a number of people in Atlanta who occupy positions of leadership within the national firm. I think that's partly a recognition of the significance of our office, too."

Supporting Black-owned Business

Atlanta-based public policy partner Ashley Bell is also general counsel for the nonprofit National Black Bank Foundation, which Dentons' public policy practice created to support Black-owned banks. The foundation has so far attracted \$250 million in direct investments, which will help Black-owned banks issue \$2.5 billion in new loans.

In December 2020, Dentons guided the Atlanta Hawks NBA franchise in refinancing a \$35 million construction loan for the Emory Sports Medicine Complex, marking a first for an NBA franchise to have a large loan underwritten only by Black-owned banks.

Upholding Statewide Reputation

Nathan L. Garroway, a partner in the litigation and dispute resolution practice, said the Atlanta office's public policy and regulation group is a "prominent part of our Georgia practice." The office also has a well-regarded state public affairs practice, he said

As the firm's Atlanta-based attorneys guide clients on litigation matters, some clients are Georgia-based and others are national, like insurers Prudential and Allstate, Garroway said.

The office also has a strong real estate practice in Atlanta, advising clients such as PNC Bank and Landmark Properties, and its attorneys have handled government affairs work for Northside Hospital, one of the largest hospital networks in the state, Garroway said.

He added that the international business community in Atlanta "creates opportunities for [the firm] to be an international firm."

"I think that for the amount of lawyers that we have in Atlanta and the depth and significant practices of the lawyers that we have is notable," said Garroway, who leads the commercial litigation practice in Atlanta.

A Storied History in the South

While the Atlanta office was initially founded in the 1970s as Long Aldridge & Norman, it merged with Dentons as McKenna Long & Aldridge in 2015. Garroway, who's been with the office for 15 years through its various iterations, said that he's noticed a shift in the office since the 2015 merger from an Atlanta-based firm to a firm that doesn't focus on a single headquarters.

"For the last seven years we've been with Dentons, which has dramatically increased the scope and presence of our capabilities because of getting offices both nationally and internationally," Garroway said.

Dentons is also well-known for its global footprint. The firm has made multiple mergers since the 2020 kick-off of its plan to enter more U.S. markets with a goal of reaching all 100 of the largest U.S. legal markets.

In December 2020, Dentons announced its merger with Alabama law firm Sirote & Permutt PC, creating a new combined entity, Dentons Sirote, an addition Garroway said has strengthened the Atlanta office.

Garroway said that while litigation continues amid the city's vibrant legal market, there's also a stream of COVID-related litigation to advise clients on.

"There's always litigation disputes, but what's happened in the last two years is that in addition to everything that there's always been, there's now a whole new set of litigation over COVID issues," Garroway said.

--Additional reporting by Rosie Manins and Aebera Coe. Editing by Ellen Johnson.