

## **Corporate Counsel**

### **Local Counsel: Your Best Bet for Managing Localized (and Sometimes Politicized) Issues**

**By Lara Pringle**

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"All politics is local" may be a timeworn phrase, but clichés become clichés because they contain at least a grain (or more) of truth. And when global or national corporations—in particular, those operating in lightning-rod industries such as energy, oil and gas, or chemicals—seek to open or expand operations in new jurisdictions, they would do well to seek counsel from local law firms who understand the political, legal, regulatory, economic and cultural facts on the ground.

As a partner at a national law firm with a strong regional presence in the southeastern United States and Gulf Coast, I have engaged the services of individual practitioners and small to midsize law firms in many parts of the country. My colleagues and I have also been asked by law firms without a presence in Texas or other states to serve as local counsel for specific projects. Drawing on this dual perspective, I have learned more than a few lessons about the value of seeking local advice in order to resolve local issues.

**Be willing to broaden your definition of "local counsel."** While the term certainly refers to lawyers with a presence and experience in the jurisdictions in question, the definition of local counsel can be further expanded to include non-attorney experts in areas such as real estate valuation, economic development policy, local and state tax law, insurance regulation. You (and your clients) want the best information from the most knowledgeable people, so expand your search accordingly.

**Seek respected advisers who know the players as well as they know the subject matter.** When clients face a legal or regulatory challenge, presenting a strong case in their defense is of utmost importance. But you can't make the case until you get in front of the right people or agencies. Here, local counsel can be invaluable. On paper, you may have identified the correct person, commission or court you need to contact, but in the real world things may not be that simple. Or, they will be much simpler if you follow an experienced guide.

For example, one of our clients recently had an issue in an area of South Texas in which we do not have as strong a presence as we do in other cities. We identified a current state senator from the district who has a private legal practice in addition to a long period of public service. While holding elected office, he has earned the respect of politicians and policymakers on both sides of the aisle. Not only did he have a deep knowledge of the legal issues at hand, he was also on a first-name basis with many of the individuals with whom we needed to negotiate a satisfactory resolution on behalf of our client. He opened doors for us, and did so more quickly and smoothly than we would have been able to do on our own.

**Local trusted leaders are often best positioned to educate decision makers.** In many cases, key municipal, county and other local committees are staffed by political appointees. These officers or commissioners are often given responsibility for making decisions involving land valuations, condemnations and other questions that can have multimillion-dollar consequences for businesses. Some of these decision makers may not have much experience or background in these areas or projects. Therefore, it is helpful to have knowledgeable, trusted

counsel that can educate and provide that necessary background or context to the decision makers.

**Cooperate in the name of client satisfaction.** More often than not, the client cares less about who got the job done and more that the task itself was accomplished. Apportioning rewards and praise are secondary concerns. Whether you are managing teams of local counsel or are serving as local counsel yourself, always keep client goals paramount. Avoid trying to become the star and focus more on being an effective team player, whether that involves collaborating to develop new or novel legal arguments and strategies, or simply submitting hours and expense reports on a timely basis.

**Seek cost-effectiveness, but not at the cost of quality.** In some cases, lawyers in smaller markets can offer top-notch services at prices lower than those of larger law firms based in metropolitan areas. This is great—but when push comes to shove, it's quality counsel that counts. Get the best representation possible, and then find a way to meet your client's legal budget.

**Become "temporary" local counsel, if necessary.** Recently, one of our clients was seeking to launch new operations in one of the Gulf Coast cities in Texas. The new project raised a number of concerns among the surrounding population, including questions about potential noise or environmental pollution and related health and safety issues. Rather than trying to resolve these questions from afar, we relocated several of our lawyers to that city, where they worked side-by-side with local public relations professionals and other advisers, and were able to hold face-to-face meetings with residents, ultimately allaying many of their concerns and allowing our client's project to move forward.

At the end of the day, working with local counsel can help your clients achieve their business objectives and further solidify their relationship with your own firm.

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