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Law firms booming in Chester County

Many local, regional firms expanding offices, hiring more lawyers

By GRETCHEN METZ
Staff Writer

EAST WHITELAND — Philadelphia law firm Stradley Ronon is expanding its presence in Chester County and spending in excess of \$1 million to do it.

The firm has occupied the remaining 8,990 square feet from a vacated tenant, Harleysville National Bank, in its Great Valley office, giving it 20,530 square feet of contiguous space.

It has also nearly doubled the number of lawyers working at the office from 18 to 32.

Stradley Ronon is just one of a number of fast-growing law firms increasing their footprints in Chester County.

In 1975, the Chester County Bar Association had 220 members. It now has 900, according to its Web site.

Executive director Wendy C. Hoffman has no trouble explaining why.

"Chester County is a desirable place to work and live," Hoffman said. "And it has a good feeder system. (The universities of) Villanova, Drexel, University of Pennsylvania, Dickenson, Widener, Temple and Rutgers all have law schools."

At Stradley Ronon, the need for expansion in the region is twofold, points out Joseph McHale, partner-in-charge of the office.

"Chester County is a terrific area for business growth,"

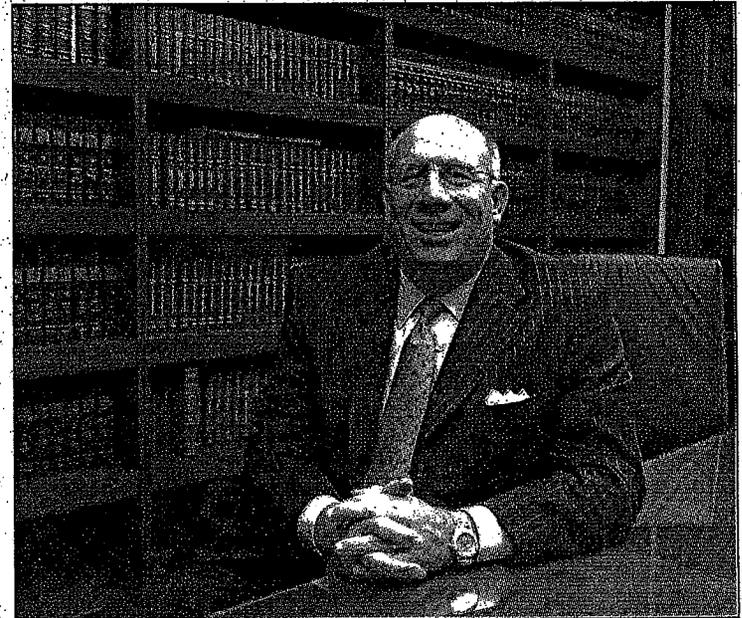
McHale said. And as the businesses grow, there is an increased need to "serve our clients out here."

Clients include The Vanguard Group, DNB First, Harleysville National Bank, Adolor, Ikon, estate clients and public finance clients.

People don't want to go into Philadelphia for their doctors or lawyers anymore, McHale joked.

Not all are litigators.

A core group of the firm's business, estates, litigation and tax attorneys have relocated from Philadelphia to East Whiteland to strengthen the capabilities of this expanded suburban office and better serve the growing



Staff photo by Larry McDevitt
Joseph McHale is partner-in-charge of law firm Stradley Ronon's East Whiteland office. The firm is spending \$1 million to expand its office in East Whiteland.

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group of clients throughout the southeastern Pennsylvania region.

"We are excited to expand here, it affords us the opportunity to serve our clients," McHale said. When it comes to the growth of Chester County, "we believe in it, are committed to it and intend to be a part of it."

Stradley Ronon opened an office in Chesterbrook, Tredyffrin, in the mid-1980s with two lawyers.

Not long after, "we represented the seller of this building," McHale said, referring to his office at 30 Valley Stream Parkway in the Great Valley Corporate Center. "At the table, the deal fell through and we bought the building."

Stradley Ronon moved in, in the late 1980s. The extra space was leased out to Har-

leysville National Bank. When the bank's lease ended this year, the law firm took back the space.

Phase one of the expansion, which started in June, was the addition of 18 new offices for lawyers.

Phase two, happening now, is the construction of a high-tech conference room and a new kitchen.

Phase three will be a new facade in the front of the building, a new entranceway and new reception area, McHale said. The entire project is expected to be complete by the end of this year.

"We own our building and we are investing in Chester County," McHale said.

At Fox Rothchild's office in Uwchlan, the head count has doubled in the last two years, going from 21 to 40.

Looking to the future, the office expects to grow to 52 lawyers and do it soon, said Michael Harrington, the managing partner at the office.

"Chester County is an amazing place," Harrington said.

In 2006, it needed more space to grow and studied where it should be geographically, Harrington said.

The office has a strong technology and life science practice and lawyers with young families who don't want to commute an hour to Philadelphia, the firm's headquarters. The suburban lawyers decided to stay in Eagleville, taking expanded space in a new building.

"Where else can you see red foxes and deer from your office window and handle regional, national and international clients, grow your practice, pay no city wage tax and have a 10-minute commute?"

**- MICHAEL HARRINGTON,
managing partner, Fox Rothschild**

Harrington said the firm is growing in Chester County because of the geography, the culture in the firm, and its high-level practice.

"Where else can you see red foxes and deer from your office window and handle regional, national and international clients, grow your practice, pay no city wage tax and have a 10-minute commute?" Harrington asked.

Clients include Swiss medical device makers Precimed and the worldwide environmental work of technology company Hewlett Packard.

In the not-to-distant future, the office will be growing to 75 lawyers, Harrington said. The additions will be in intellectual property, real estate and labor practices.

Despite its quick growth, the office insists on one thing: "we don't commit to someone unless we like them," Harrington said. "That is important. This is a fun office."

West Chester law firm MacElree Harvey added an office in Centreville, Del., last year.

Though residential real es-

tate law is slow in the ongoing sluggish economy, commercial real estate is still strong, even growing, said Lance Nelson, managing partner.

Because of its geography in southeastern Pennsylvania and Delaware, the firm handles a significant number of bankruptcy cases in Philadelphia and Wilmington, Del. — a practice that is growing for the same reason real estate is flat: the sluggish economy.

Saul Ewing, based in Philadelphia, has had an office in Chester County for a number of years but ramped up its presence in 2001 when it moved into larger quarters in Chesterbrook, going from 18 lawyers to 28, said Michael Burg, managing partner.

The office does substantial land-use law despite the flat economy, although financing those transactions is getting tougher, Burg said. Doing real estate deals in Chester County is still good business and does not mirror what is reported in the national press.

Clients at the Chesterbrook office include Shire, Ameri-sourceBergen, Liberty Property Trust, Johnson Matthey and AstraZeneca.

The office is considering adding more space and "we are always looking for good people," Burg said.

Buckley, Brion, McGuire, Morris & Sommer in West Chester added three attorneys this fall, said Joseph E. "Skip" Brion, partner.

The firm moved into new, larger offices last year with the intention to have space available to expand, Brion said.

Joel Frank, managing partner at Lamb McErlane in West Chester, said the firm has added six lawyers in the past two years, three in estates and trusts. The current head count is 29. Adding more lawyers in the immediate future is not in the game plan, Frank said.

Ross Unruh of Unruh Turner Burke & Frees in West Chester said the firm has grown from nine to 20 lawyers in the last 10 years and is evaluating adding more.

Likewise, Robert Adams, partner at Gawthrop Greenwood in West Chester, said the firm has gone from 10 to 18 lawyers in the last 10 years. The firm, which focuses on real estate, land development and municipal law, is evaluating adding more attorneys that would complement its current practices.

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