

## Florida Powerhouse: Bilzin Sumberg

By **Shayna Posses**

*Law360, New York (September 28, 2017, 4:19 PM EDT)* -- Miami firm Bilzin Sumberg Baena Price & Axelrod LLP is fiercely proud of its sole location and committed to helping its community thrive, tackling game-changing projects like an approximately \$2.5 billion train system linking central and South Florida, while bolstering its international tax and private wealth practice to accommodate booming foreign investments.

Bilzin Sumberg has practiced out of one office in Miami since it was founded almost 20 years ago, and its practice group leaders say that's a major reason the firm has been at the forefront of most of the projects that have transformed the city in recent years, a feat that once again earned it a spot among Law360's Florida Powerhouses.



"We really have followed the growth of Miami, the evolution of Miami, and we make it our business to align ourselves with the decision makers in our community, to be part of the fabric of our community, and to become counselors to those who recognize the unique position Miami has globally," said Albert E. Dotson Jr., leader of the land development and government relations practice group.

That community connection has led to the firm becoming a pioneer in the public-private partnership, or P3, arena in the state, he said. As South Florida has evolved into a global market, it has become clear that the state must bolster its infrastructure, Dotson explained, noting that Bilzin Sumberg was quick to identify the P3 model as a way to handle some of those needs.

A key example is the firm's representation of All Aboard Florida as it works to develop the Brightline train service, which will connect Miami to Orlando, stopping in Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach along the way.

The approximately \$2.5 billion high-speed passenger rail project is slated to start service later this year and will be transformational, Dotson said, not only because of the rail component, but because of the development at each station, which will provide further incentive to use the service.

"There remains a consistent focus on how we can better move people through our public transit systems, whether that is expanding our trains and rail capacity or rethinking our roadway

infrastructure," he said. "That is something that we believe we have to continue to focus on, as a community, as an industry and as a firm."

Having its finger on the community's pulse has also led the firm to beef up its international tax and private wealth practice in recent years, said Jay M. Sakalo, leader of the business finance and restructuring and corporate practices. The city has been on "somewhat of a hockey-stick trajectory the last couple of decades," driven in part by the enormous influx of foreign capital, he noted.

At this point, about 35 percent of the firm's business comes from overseas and that number is even higher, about 70 percent, when it comes to the international tax and private wealth practice, said Richard M. Goldstein, who chairs the tax and estate planning group.

And, Goldstein noted, "when a foreign person is contemplating coming to the United States — either permanently or on an investment basis — basically the first thing that they do is they want to know what the tax implications are going to be for their types of investments."

The firm has made some strategic hires in the group over the last year — including Hal Webb, the co-founder of an international tax and estate planning boutique, and former Baker McKenzie partner Jennifer Wioncek — and expects the practice to remain a tremendous growth area, Goldstein said.

Local and international clients alike look to the firm for help with matters in Florida and beyond because its roughly 100 attorneys know their community and know each other, Sakalo explained, saying they pride themselves on being able to pull together a top-notch team at the drop of a hat — or during a hurricane.

"The day before Miami started shutting down because of Irma, I received a call from a client based in New York to handle a new deal on a matter in California. They called me at 3 o'clock, with people exiting the city, exiting the office to go deal with their own personal issues, and I had a team assembled by the end of the day," he said.

Sakalo continued, "That's something that really makes us unique. I know every one of my partners. I know their strengths, I know their weaknesses, and I know how they can add value to our clients' matters."

That collaborative approach makes it possible for the firm to work on complex projects like the Brickell Flatiron tower, which is set to be one of the country's tallest residential buildings at over 700 feet.

The project has called on attorneys from across the firm, Sakalo explained, including people from the corporate department who helped negotiated joint venture agreements and finance and real estate partners who handled two significant financings, including a \$236 million construction loan.

This was supposed to be an off year for real estate, practice group leader Suzanne Amaducci-Adams noted. But Bilzin Sumberg — which has the largest real estate group in South Florida and perhaps the state — managed to close over \$2 billion in construction financing, she said.

"I don't care where you are; it's a lot of money," Amaducci-Adams said.

The firm also handled a number of deals that demanded out-of-the-box thinking, like the sale of Jungle Island, an 18-acre exotic animal park.

The Bilzin Sumberg team worked with the veterinarian who developed the Miami landmark to score approval in April for a \$60 million sale to a European group that plans to redevelop it into an entertainment complex, with features like a water park and a hotel, Amaducci-Adams said.

The deal was rewarding for the team because they saw the developer essentially "send his kid off to college," turning the project over to someone who could expand it in a way he'd always dreamed of, Amaducci-Adams said. Plus, she noted, it didn't hurt that the sale had some particularly unique aspects.

"How many tigers have you sold?" she asked with a laugh.

The firm's deep ties to the community are a big part of what makes Bilzin Sumberg so successful in handling these sorts of one-of-a-kind deals, Dotson said.

"We are able to represent those clients in a manner that's very different than some of our global competitors because it requires more in our community than just being a great lawyer — which we focus on — but you must also understand the local politics, the local business community and the local priorities," he said.

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg.

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