

Florida Powerhouse: Bilzin Sumberg

By **Carolina Bolado**

Law360 (August 29, 2018, 5:27 PM EDT) -- One of the smallest of this year's Law360 Florida Powerhouses, Bilzin Sumberg Baena Price & Axelrod LLP regularly punches above its weight class, by working on transformational projects like a \$2.4 billion passenger train from Miami to Orlando and defending clients in high-stakes mortgage lawsuits.

The 20-year-old firm, with 100 attorneys housed under one roof in Miami, has become a major player not just in South Florida, but elsewhere in the state and beyond, where among the practices it's become known for are its financial services litigation and mortgage defense.

"Because of our strong real estate practice, there are a lot of synergies there," litigation practice group leader Phil Stein said. "We've become over the last several years the go-to defense firm for a number of banks and virtually all the leading mortgage companies in the country."

The firm is handling more than 100 high-stakes mortgage lawsuits involving claims of more than \$1.2 billion, he said.

"We do have a tremendous Florida nexus, but it's great and interesting and impressive that we're increasingly getting work outside the state," Stein said. "We're well-known not just in our own community, but also regionally and nationally."

The firm started in 1998 with the objective of becoming a preeminent regional firm with top talent. In its first two years of existence, several groups of attorneys left larger national firms and joined forces at Bilzin Sumberg.

While other firms focused on expanding their geographic footprints, Bilzin Sumberg took a different approach by keeping all of its attorneys under one roof in downtown Miami, which has flourished into a major international business center.

The decision helped Bilzin Sumberg focus on premier clients and much larger deals and matters than are usually available elsewhere in Florida. The firm now regularly competes for work with global firms and has formidable real estate, litigation, government relations and private wealth management practices, among others.



The firm will enter a new era in January, when managing partner John Sumberg, who has helmed the firm since its founding, will hand the reins to Al Dotson. Dotson, who joined the firm just a few months after its inception, said that so far, the transition has been seamless and that he is looking forward to stepping into the managing partner role. The plan, he said, is to continue Sumberg's vision.

"One of the interesting parts about Bilzin Sumberg is that we have been a very consistent law firm both as it relates to our head count and among the metrics by which law firms are judged, like profits per partner," Dotson said. "We're very proud about that consistent performance."

Stein said that over the last two decades, Sumberg has fostered an entrepreneurial spirit that has helped the firm not just survive, but thrive, and allowed it to be stable even during the economic downturn.

"That sense of stability we've had over 20 years and really strong, insightful management has helped us get to an enviable place," Stein said.

Over the past few years, Bilzin Sumberg has worked with Florida East Coast Industries to get the much-anticipated \$2.4 billion Brightline passenger train up and running between Miami and Orlando. Earlier this year, the train began operating between Miami, Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach, and plans to continue to Orlando are already underway. The firm advised the train's owner not just on the development, financing and operation of the train, but also on development of mixed-use towers that feature office, retail and residential space directly above the train station in downtown Miami.

Brightline is just one of several infrastructure projects on which Bilzin Sumberg attorneys are working, many of which involve partnering with government entities. In 2017, the firm facilitated more than \$4 billion in proposed public-private infrastructure, such as the redevelopment of two public municipal parking garages in Coral Gables; a redevelopment of the Coconut Grove Metrorail station and the surrounding government-owned property; and a \$1.2 billion terminal optimization program at Miami International Airport.

"We're in desperate need of infrastructure investment: transportation and water and sewer," Dotson, who is an expert in government relations and public-private partnerships, said.

The Bilzin Sumberg real estate practice, long a backbone of the firm, has secured more than \$5 billion in financing for clients in the past two years.

Jim Shindell, chair of the real estate department, said that the real estate group used to be more of a standalone practice, but over the years that changed into a collaborative environment where real estate attorneys are constantly working with their colleagues elsewhere in the firm.

"I view us now almost as a megagroup because we couldn't do what we do without the land use and government relations department or the joint venture department and the outstanding lawyers who add value to our clients and make us look good," Shindell said.

The group helped Turnberry Ocean Club, a 154-unit ultra-luxury condominium project in Sunny Isles Beach, secure \$395 million in mortgage capitalization and secured a \$115 million loan for the Hyde Beach House, a hotel-condominium building in Hollywood. The firm also worked on the \$72 million sale of the Conrad Hotel in Miami, a deal that was complicated by an attached office component that had previously sold for \$142 million.

Bilzin Sumberg also worked on a \$170 million acquisition of a 1.7-million-square-foot office complex in South Florida and on a \$180 million sale of an industrial and logistics facility in Hialeah.

With the real estate market expected to continue to be strong, Shindell says he expects attorneys in the group to be busy in the near future. And if at some point the market begins to turn, the real estate group has a counter-cyclical practice representing special servicers, he said.

“They become very busy when things begin to go badly,” Shindell said. “In certain ways, the work becomes heavier for us. I’m not saying it’s much fun.”

Dotson says the firm’s success can be traced to its commitment to the South Florida community, not just through the work the attorneys do, but also through institutional programs to give back to local nonprofit organizations.

The firm does traditional pro bono work — most recently, attorneys at Bilzin Sumberg have been involved in representing family members and groups affected by the Feb. 14 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland — but attorneys are also encouraged from the beginning to get involved locally in other ways, Dotson said.

He pointed to an initiative started a few years ago for new attorneys at the firm that invited community leaders, government leaders and others to talk about opportunities for them to connect locally in the community.

“We really have institutionalized our belief that we must be connected to our community,” Dotson said.

--Editing by Orlando Lorenzo.