

McNamara steps out of managing partner role at Phillips Lytle

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The legal industry has gone through its fair share of changes over the past decade. It hasn't stopped law firm Phillips Lytle from operating smoothly under this changing landscape.

The Buffalo-based firm relocated to its new headquarters at Canalside, as well as moving in Manhattan where the practice had expanded, and transitioned into other geographic markets, such as Washington D.C.

All the while, there was a nationwide recession, the worst of it occurring from 2007-09, which had a profound effect on the economy and businesses such as law firms.

Phillips Lytle came out of those transition periods and company-wide maneuvers reporting success, according to firm officials. During that time, David McNamara was the guiding force behind Buffalo's second largest firm, serving as Phillips Lytle's managing partner since October 2007.

As he began his ninth year in the post, McNamara realized that his tenure was close to the end. He started surveying what would be necessary for a change in leadership and found that this would be as good of a time as any to begin the process.



PHOTOGRAPHER: JIM COURTNEY

Dave McNamara

On Monday, Phillips Lytle announced McNamara will step aside as managing partner and return full-time to his commercial litigation practice with the firm at the end of the year. A successor will be named late this summer or in the early fall.

“As I took a step back, I determined now was a very good time to facilitate a successful transition,” he said. “All the conditions are right for it.”

Managing partners can sometimes serve 10 to 15-plus years, but typically they don’t stay in the position for that long. The past two Phillips Lytle managing partners each served for six years, including Morgan Graham, whom McNamara succeeded.

McNamara, 55, said he has remained in the position because of a mutual comfort between himself and the firm’s partners and Governing Committee during a time of change for the industry and firm.

“It’s been a really exciting time in the history of the firm,” he said. “It’s an organization that has highly motivated and accomplished people in it and I think it’s important that we all kind of pull the oar in sync to move the organization forward.”

Guiding the firm through the challenges of a recession were committed partners and a loyal client base, according to McNamara. Even at the toughest point for most businesses, the firm did not make any reductions in staff and was able to take advantages of opportunities in the marketplace, he added.

Some have wondered aloud to McNamara whether the job has been like herding cats, but he said it has been more similar to riding a thoroughbred.

“It speaks volumes about the forward thinking nature of the firm’s management and the partnership as whole,” he said. “It’s very gratifying to be attached to an organization that has this type of collective personality.”

David Murray, a firm partner and chair of the Governing Committee, said McNamara’s vision has been to the benefit to the firm.

“During his nine-year tenure as managing partner, Dave has led Phillips Lytle through a period of tremendous success,” Murray said. “Under his leadership, we have expanded into new geographic markets and practice areas, and recruited high-end legal talent.”

One of the more difficult decisions during McNamara's tenure was deciding whether to move into new office space at One Canalside. McNamara said partners were able to get comfortable with the idea, and the move happened in 2014. The area since has thrived with Phillips Lytle as an anchor tenant in a building overlooking the waterfront.

"We felt like this was going to be an emerging area and an important area in the city and ultimately made the decision to come here, which I think we are now all grateful to have made," he said.

As an associate in the firm, McNamara was assigned to work in its New York City office in 1993. He worked there for nearly 10 years while still residing in Buffalo and helped expand the practices of an office that started as a boutique operation with clients in the banking industry.

"It is a city with significant opportunities especially for a firm like ours, which can deliver the capabilities we have into the marketplace at a price that we're able to deliver based upon our presence in Buffalo," he said.

McNamara said he never really aspired to this position but wound up on a management track after being appointed to head the litigation practice. Then in 2001, he began to serve on the eight-person Governing Committee, of which he is still a member.

So, why step aside now? McNamara said there is comfort in doing so for a variety of reasons, but most important is that the firm is "very stable" fiscally. Also, it recently adopted a new strategic plan so his successor will have the benefit of a roadmap to manage. The wave of baby boomer retirements at the firm has also been addressed, McNamara said. He added there's a stable management team and a forward-thinking Governing Committee in place.

"It was a fascinating time of rapid change in the industry but the one constant is if you have the correct talent you can succeed and overcome whatever challenges the industry throws at you," he added.

McNamara is enthusiastic about reintegrating into his practice at a higher level and calling on some of the contacts and friendships that he developed as a managing partner to expand the firm's business.

The next managing partner will be appointed by the Governing Committee, which has already started deliberations on potential candidates. McNamara will take part in the decision to choose his successor and assist the chosen candidate in the transition.

“That will give us a few months to transition,” he said. “In all likelihood, the candidates will be people that have been involved and familiar with the operations of the firm.”

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