

BACK STORY

ECONOMIC SLOWDOWN SLOW TO IMPACT NEVADA LAWYERS

BY RICHARD VILKIN, ESQ.

“Many lawyers seem to believe the major impact of the economy so far has been on large national firms with practices linked directly to Wall Street institutions.”

Despite the fears, the economy appears to have only stopped overall growth in legal work in Nevada – rather than to have caused significant cutbacks – and there are signs of life.

Recent statistics from the Eighth Judicial District Court show that civil case filings for the first quarter of 2009 were up an impressive 36 percent over the same period in 2008. That increase follows about a 10-percent increase in Clark County from mid-2007 to mid-2008. The rest of the state didn’t change much over that same period in 2007-2008.

“We’re going to be pretty stable through the end of the year,” says Paul R. Hejmanowski, managing partner of Lionel Sawyer & Collins. He explained that his firm did begin tightening the belt about a year and a half ago in anticipation of a slowdown. “We’re not cutting back right now, but we’re not hiring. I don’t yet see signs of a recovery.”

Other large Nevada firms report similar conditions, although clearly some firms with large practices focused on transactional and development-related work have been affected in a more significant way. Many lawyers seem to believe the major impact of the economy so far has been on large national firms with practices linked directly to Wall Street institutions.

In northern Nevada, the impact of the economy has been minimal so far, with tightening at some firms and in government, according to Leslie Bryan Hart, president of the Washoe County Bar Association. “I think the Nevada firms have been better able to manage than the large national firms.”

The Eighth District filing statistics do show just under a 10 percent drop in criminal and probate filings for the first quarter of 2009, as compared to the same period in 2008. Medical malpractice filings – a small portion of all civil filings – jumped significantly, due primarily to endoscopy cases.

The State Bar of Nevada has seen a 15 percent drop in the number of persons sitting for the July bar exam between 2006 and 2008, but has not seen an impact on membership numbers or payment of dues, according to Executive Director Kimberly Farmer.

At the Boyd School of Law, which has seen a steady increase in hiring over the past several years, things may be leveling off, according to Cynthia Asher, Director of Career Services. She explains that it’s still too early to really gauge the effect of the economy on 2009 grads. “There’s cause for concern, but the legal market in Nevada is not being hit as hard as other segments of our economy.” She adds that the school has seen some growth in job opportunities in the fields of personal injury and insurance defense.

Some law firms are looking for an economic recovery to begin later this year or early next, while others still have a finger in the wind.

“Overall, our business has been pretty good,” says Patrick G. Byrne, managing partner for the Las Vegas office of Snell & Wilmer. “Our business transactional practice is down, but our litigation practice is good, and we have not laid off any lawyers, although we are being a lot more cautious in hiring. But who knows what the crystal ball will say in three to six months?” **NL**

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