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Client Conflicts Drive BigLaw Vets To Form Texas Boutique

By Lynn LaRowe

Law360 (February 6, 2024, 4:05 PM EST) -- Frustrated by client conflicts hampering their opportunities, a group of BigLaw oil and gas attorneys from Alston & Bird LLP and Holland & Knight LLP have launched Texas litigation boutique Vartabedian Hester & Haynes LLP, with the growing firm already having more work than lawyers available.

Rob Vartabedian, who departed Alston & Bird with fellow name partner Conrad Hester and eight other colleagues, told Law360 Pulse that the "client conflicts" he was regularly running into at the large firm was the primary motivation behind the recent move.

"Most of our cases are oil and gas companies having a dispute with another oil and gas company," Vartabedian said. "Given the consolidations across the industry, it was becoming unmanageable in terms of client conflicts."

Vartabedian said the startup firm has clients including "a number of public oil and gas companies, in addition to a large number of private-equity backed oil and gas companies and a number of mineral owners."

"We have more work than lawyers currently, so we're headed for growth," Vartabedian said. "We have seven partners and five associates, and we expect to add more by mid-February."

The firm already has offices in Dallas and Fort Worth, and plans to open a third location in the coming weeks.

In addition to Vartabedian and Hester, who is the new firm's managing partner, most of its lawyers came from Alston & Bird's Fort Worth office, including partners Gaye Lentz, Nick Davis and Alix Allison and five associates, Vartabedian said.

Vartabedian said Lentz is both a lawyer and a petroleum engineer "who helps with the deal side of a lot of our oil and gas disputes," and that Davis has "substantial experience in oil and gas and also handles a lot of our arbitrations." Allison was a standout oil and gas associate at Alston & Bird who arrived at Vartabedian Hester as a partner, Vartabedian said.

The firm's other partners, Craig Haynes and Rachelle "Shelley" Glazer, both came aboard from Holland & Knight, where they had practiced for the bulk of their legal careers.

Haynes, a name partner and leader of the new firm's Dallas office, was with Holland & Knight, formerly Thompson & Knight, for nearly 40 years, and Glazer was there for more than four decades.

Haynes told Law360 Pulse that he wasn't looking to change law firms but couldn't pass up "an



Rob Vartabedian



Conrad Hester



Craig Haynes

opportunity that doesn't come along very often."

"Rob and Conrad are incredibly good lawyers, all-star people," Haynes said. "And then with Shelley and I, I think we have a shot at being the premier oil and gas litigation boutique in the country."

Haynes said he has tried cases with Vartabedian and Hester, and that he and Glazer "make a pretty good team and have for a long time. We're not going to have the conflicts issues that we had working at a major law firm, and we're excited about that. We're getting off the ground at a sprint, and I think we're going to be fun to watch."

Glazer, who will be based in the Dallas office, told Law360 Pulse that she is "excited about being with a small firm, because particularly in oil-and-gas-related insurance disputes, we won't have the conflicts we had."

"This is an opportunity to really help clients and be more nimble and flexible and do the kind of work I want to do," Glazer said, adding that conflicts at her big firm often kept her from accepting work related to both the insurance and oil and gas industries.

Vartabedian said it is no secret that the firm expects to open its third location this month in Monahans, Texas, in the Delaware Basin, which refers to the western portion of the Lone Star State's oil-rich Permian Basin.

Greg Holly, who operates a solo practice in Monahans, is expected to officially join the firm as managing partner of the soon-to-launch Monahans shop in the next couple of weeks, Vartabedian said.

Vartabedian said that, like him, he expects lawyers will be drawn to the smaller firm because of the flexibility it offers.

"We had to decide whether we were going to continue to offer BigLaw-level salaries and Cravath-level bonuses," Vartabedian said. "We are going to pay our associates on the Cravath scale. We believe that working at a boutique firm with lower hour requirements and BigLaw pay will be attractive to associates."

--Editing by Nicole Bleier.

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