

Regional Law Firms Expand Through Mergers in Secondary Markets



Rising Focus on Secondary Markets

A growing trend among regional law firms is to pursue growth through mergers in mid-sized markets rather than competing in top-tier legal hubs like New York or Chicago. According to data from Fairfax Associates, about 60% of the law firm mergers completed in the first three quarters of 2024 involved firms expanding in secondary markets such as Denver, Las Vegas, and Seattle. High-profile mergers in the third quarter of 2025, such as Womble Bond Dickinson's acquisition of Phoenix-based Lewis Roca, further highlight this shift.

Womble's incoming CEO, Merrick Benn, emphasized that the firm is seeking growth opportunities outside of top-tier cities, pointing to locations like Phoenix and Charlotte, which provide favorable conditions for expansion without the exorbitant costs of big-city offices. This strategy reflects the belief that dominating a growing regional market offers better long-term prospects than being a smaller player in saturated markets like New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago.

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Middle Markets Offer Competitive Advantages

For many law firms, mid-sized cities present an opportunity to carve out a dominant position without facing intense competition from global legal giants. Experts like Bruce MacEwen, a consultant with Adam Smith, Esq., note that even the most aggressive growth strategies from top-tier firms like Paul Weiss and Latham have largely bypassed states such as Arizona and Colorado, favoring regions with dense financial services and capital markets activity.

MacEwen adds that firms like Paul Weiss require access to industries like private equity and financial services to support their growth strategies, which are more prevalent in top-tier cities. In contrast, secondary markets such as Phoenix offer unique opportunities, especially in sectors like retail chain headquarters, where these global firms have less of a foothold.

Mergers Fuel Regional Expansion

Several notable mergers have fueled law firm expansion in mid-sized markets in 2024. Spencer Fane, a firm founded in Kansas City, expanded into Utah and New Mexico earlier this year. It recently announced a merger with Holley Driggs, increasing its presence in Las Vegas by two-thirds. Similarly, Fennemore Craig acquired 80 lawyers from the dissolved firm Moye White in Denver, marking its fourth merger of the year.

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Other major moves include Womble's acquisition of Lewis Roca, which adds 221 lawyers to its team, and Taft Stettinius & Hollister's merger with Denver-based Sherman & Howard. Ballard Spahr also made significant moves by merging with Lane Powell and adding new offices in Seattle, Portland, and Anchorage.

Cost Benefits and Strategic Growth

Secondary markets provide law firms with a cost advantage compared to high-priced markets like New York and Los Angeles. Bruce MacEwen points out that operating in these markets can offer better profitability for firms focused on middle-market billing rates. This allows them to focus on sectors that align with their pricing structures while avoiding the intense competition and cost structures of larger cities.

Taft Stettinius & Hollister's chair, Robert Hicks, noted that the firm's focus on municipal bonds and finance aligns well with its Denver and Phoenix offices. This middle-market focus has so far kept the firm from expanding into more expensive regions like New York or Florida, where major firms operate on different business models.

Expanding Into the Tech Sector

Ballard Spahr's merger with Lane Powell opens new doors for the firm to tap into the Pacific Northwest's growing tech industry. The firm's chair, Peter Michaud, who joined through a previous acquisition, emphasized the importance of regional growth while maintaining the firm's competitive pricing structure, which appeals to clients in these secondary markets.

Growing Interest in Mergers

The trend of regional firms merging for growth shows no sign of slowing down. Spencer Fane's managing partner, Patrick Whalen, noted that the number of firms interested in joining forces with his operation has grown over the last five years. Many law firms, regardless of size, are becoming more open to the idea of mergers as a way to expand their geographic reach and stay competitive.

In conclusion, the focus on secondary markets is helping regional law firms grow without facing the steep competition and high costs of major legal centers. These mergers allow firms to expand their geographic reach, build sector-specific practices, and strengthen their competitive positions in emerging markets.

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