



California Powerhouse: Best Best & Krieger

By Ryan Boysen

Law360 (September 6, 2018, 7:23 PM EDT) -- Over the past year, Best Best & Krieger has shepherded billions of dollars' worth of projects, such as the massive rail infrastructure expansion at the Port of Long Beach, through California's notoriously complex environmental review framework and helped municipalities across the Golden State deal with new and thorny issues like Airbnb and legalized marijuana, establishing itself as one of the most diverse midsize law firms in the country.

The firm's success has landed it a spot on Law360's list of 2018 California Powerhouses, which recognizes law firms that stand out for the size of their footprint in California and the reach of their legal influence across the state's booming economy.

BB&K is unique in that it specializes in so-called public agency law, which means that the firm primarily helps cities, counties and other public agencies create policies and projects and then defend them from legal challenges.

Eric Garner, the firm's sole managing partner since 2005, said that even though that niche doesn't allow the firm to bill as much as, say, a corporate defense firm, business has been booming for the past few years thanks to California's rock-solid economy and the increasing complexity of its regulatory framework.

"My specialty is water, and back when I started practicing 31 years ago you could just say you were a water attorney," Garner said. "Now you have to specify: water rights, water rates, water supply — we now have attorneys that do nothing but one of those sub-specialties day in and day out."

"So the growth demand for our services has been driven in large part by the increasing complexity of the issues our clients face, and that in turn has led to us expanding the firm in recent years to better tackle those issues," he added.

BB&K was founded in 1891 in Riverside, making it the fifth-oldest law firm in California, Garner said. The firm has 201 attorneys in the Golden State as of July 1. Besides the Riverside headquarters, the firm has offices in Sacramento, Walnut Creek, Indian Wells, Irvine, Los Angeles, Manhattan Beach, Ontario, San Diego and a Washington, D.C., office primarily devoted to telecoms work.



BB&K is currently helping several projects sponsored by various agencies navigate the National Environmental Policy Act and its California cousin, the California Environmental Quality Act, work that consists largely of helping to draft and defend so-called Environmental Impact Reports.

Among those are an \$800 million proposed expansion to the railway capacity of the second-busiest port in the U.S., the Port of Long Beach, which would take thousands of trucks off the road by making it easier for incoming ships to place their cargo directly onto trains.

The city cleared the CEQA review process by itself and BB&K is now helping to guide the project through NEPA review.

“Usually when you think of large-scale transportation projects you think of something that’s going to worsen air quality, but this railway expansion is interesting because it will actually have the opposite effect,” said partner Charity Schiller.

“Not only will this project be improving international commerce, which opens up the possibility of federal funding, it will also be a boon for the air quality of the entire Southland,” she added.

BB&K has also helped to secure funding and environmental approvals for the planned \$1.7 billion I-15 Express Lanes Corridor project, which aims to reduce congestion by adding express lanes to a 15-mile stretch of highway in Riverside, and the firm helped the Port of San Diego to finally nail down plans for a \$1.1 billion public-private partnership deal in May to create the Chula Vista Bayfront hotel and convention center.

BB&K has also been instrumental in helping the Coachella Valley Association of Governments lock down plans for CV Link, a \$100 million, 50-mile thoroughfare that will connect several cities and is designed exclusively for biking, walking and other non-motorized forms of transportation. A major lawsuit challenging the project was dismissed in March.

In addition to guiding individual projects, many BB&K attorneys spend their days helping cities and other municipalities formulate responses to problems as they arise.

Christi Hogin, who joined BB&K as of counsel in April when the firm absorbed her previous firm, Jenkins & Hogin, serves as a city attorney for Malibu, Lomita and Palos Verdes. She said California’s cities are primarily grappling with four big, statewide issues: California’s recent legalization of marijuana, how to handle Airbnb, stormwater management and housing policy.

“It’s very interesting and challenging to be a part of the process as communities come to grips with these changes and decide how to respond,” Hogin said. “I think BB&K has been very good at remaining nimble and helping our clients deal with those issues as they arise.”

Hogin said much of the firm’s success in staying on top of trends is its embrace of technology, like its cloud database that’s easily accessible across the whole firm and a Slack-like messaging platform that helps BB&K attorneys communicate on the fly.

“The firm has built out an extraordinary tech infrastructure in recent years, which has given us a lot of mobility,” Hogin said. “In this day and age, you can’t get a call about a legal question, hang up and then go do research in the library for a few hours.”

“These days I get a call at seven at night from a city council member asking ‘Hey, should I send this tweet or not?’ and you need to be able to respond immediately.”

Schiller seconded Hogin’s praise of BB&K’s embrace of tech, but said another thing that sets the firm apart is its embrace of female and minority attorneys, a fact that landed it on this year’s Law360 ranking of Best Firms for Women and Minority Attorneys.

“This firm doesn’t just tolerate, but actively welcomes women in leadership roles,” Schiller said. “It’s a very different culture than a lot of the bigger firms. We don’t have a ‘mommy track,’ which you hear some of those talk about. Here you feel like, as a woman, you can really contribute and participate and have your voice be recognized.”

--Editing by Orlando Lorenzo.