

## Connecticut Powerhouse: Pullman & Comley LLC

By Aaron Keller

*Law360 (September 17, 2024, 12:31 PM EDT)* -- Focusing on green energy, guiding economic development and crafting unique solutions to social inequality, Pullman & Comley LLC has embraced Connecticut's future while capitalizing on its past, parlaying its position as the biggest law firm in the state's largest city to help guide communities confronting and overcoming postindustrial challenges.

In the past year, the firm's unparalleled knowledge of state and local governments helped hedge fund D.E. Shaw & Co. LP's investment arm score regulatory approvals for what has been billed as the largest solar energy project in New England, a 485-acre site at what was once a gravel pit. And, since solar power requires storage, the firm helped Key Capture Energy clear first-of-their-kind regulatory hurdles for eight large-scale battery storage facilities. These and other victories cemented Pullman & Comley's status as a Law360 Regional Powerhouse in 2024.



"We started with an area of excellence, Bridgeport," said Lee D. Hoffman, the firm's chair. "We're working on significant matters for the city and businesses around Bridgeport. We have a very significant presence on the regional Chamber of Commerce. And we've duplicated that success in Hartford and Waterbury."

The firm, founded in 1919, is keenly watching and embracing Connecticut's changes, acting as both a confidant and a catalyst as political leaders seek partnerships with companies willing to help the state fulfill net-zero emissions goals by 2050. The firm helped governments issue \$1.6 billion in state and municipal bonds, a feat the firm says far surpasses its peers.

### Rebuilds, Upgrades, Expansions

Pullman & Comley has also charted courses through complex regulatory schemes to help investors and municipalities repurpose large, abandoned factories and brownfield sites into community anchors. The firm has helped the borough of Naugatuck breathe new life into a 100-acre brownfield site that includes a former Uniroyal Chemical facility; the municipality envisions the location as a new transportation, commercial and affordable housing complex. Other projects include multiple real estate redevelopments near Hartford and large waterfront redevelopments in Hartford, Bridgeport and Stamford.

Elsewhere, the firm has helped Bradley International Airport in Windsor Locks, New England's second-largest air terminal, finance a \$210 million ground transportation hub.

John F. Stafstrom Jr., co-chair of the firm's public and private finance department, noted that Pullman & Comley is also representing the town of East Haven in a proposed expansion of Tweed New Haven Airport.

"We do both the public side of the work and represent private developers," Stafstrom said. "We understand both needs."

He cited a \$145 million upgrade to the XL Center, a city-owned coliseum formerly known as the Hartford Civic Center, as an example of the firm's work. The upgrade includes a \$20 million contribution from the facility's private operator, a public-private partnership Stafstrom said would revitalize the "economic driver that brings people into downtown."

Stafstrom said half the state's municipal governments are Pullman & Comley clients. So are major medical centers and many of its public and private schools.

### **Cannabis Biz Growth Guides**

Plus, he noted, the firm has embraced the state's medical and recreational cannabis industry, guiding growers, distributors, retailers and social equity applicants through licenses and permit reviews.

Stafstrom said some firms were either hesitant to enter the emerging cannabis market or failed to anticipate how large it would become. The Connecticut Department of Consumer Protection in January said 2023 sales topped \$274 million.

The Connecticut Cannabis Chamber of Commerce in 2022 bestowed Pullman & Comley's Andrew Glassman, the chair of the firm's cannabis, hemp and CBD team, with its first-ever attorney of the year award.

Stafstrom also said the firm's recognized expertise in tax increment financing, or TIF, a way for municipalities to raise revenue to address blighted areas, was a significant source of business and a key tool for many of the projects he handled.

"There are a lot of good law firms and lawyers in Connecticut," he said. "We are much better at anticipating our client's needs as well as possible trends," including TIF, he added.

### **'A Planned Evolution'**

Hoffman called the firm's growth a "planned evolution." Over the years, it added three Connecticut offices to its letterhead — Hartford, Waterbury and Westport — making key acquisitions and mergers to expand its footprint.

Four retired judges are part of Pullman & Comley's alternative dispute resolution team, and Hoffman called one member, Gary B. O'Connor, the dean of the Waterbury bar. Waterbury is one of three cities in Connecticut where complex litigation dockets are heard and where the state's chief civil judge currently sits.

"We are intentionally reverse leveraged," Hoffman explained. "We have more partners than associates. Our clients enjoy working with an experienced lawyer. When you're looking for counsel and an answer that can't be found in 20 minutes on Google, you need someone with more experience and depth of thinking than you'd otherwise find."

He described his firm's typical hire as someone who doesn't "want to litigate the same issue over and over where there's comfort and precedent."

"We really get excited about ... doing something new that hasn't been done before," he said.

While some firms have found success commoditizing legal services, Hoffman believes the trend in Connecticut has largely been the opposite.

### **Handcrafted Legal Help**

"The sophisticated practitioners of law are either figuring out a way to fully automate and provide legal services as a commodity or they're going bespoke," he explained, saying "handcrafted legal services" have been increasingly sought in Connecticut.

An example is Pullman & Comley's assistance to Erick Russell, Connecticut's state treasure, as the state developed a "baby bonds" initiative. Russell is a former partner at the firm.

The first-in-the-nation program invests \$3,200 for every Connecticut child born into poverty. Once they become adults, the recipients can tap the funds to buy a home, start a business or secure an education in Connecticut.

"We're trying to break the cycle of poverty," Hoffman explained. "Generally, people in the middle class don't regress down below the poverty line. They have access to things in their lives that allow them to remain in the middle class. Similarly, people under the poverty line have a hard time breaking through the poverty line and getting into the middle class."

He noted that the firm has a solid track record working with governments regardless of administration and political party.

Connecticut is America's third-smallest state by geography. Only Delaware and neighboring Rhode Island are smaller. Connecticut is also decentralized, Hoffman observed, with less of a focus on anchor cities and a "gravitational pull" that is not easy to ascertain compared with other states containing clearly defined major metropolitan areas.

"Connecticut is built far more balanced in term of population," he noted, indicating that it is easy for the firm's 86 in-state attorneys to service the entire state from its Bridgeport, Hartford, Waterbury and Westport locations.

The firm has two out-of-state attorneys and additional offices in nearby White Plains, New York; Wakefield, Rhode Island; and Springfield, Massachusetts.

Stafstrom, who has been with Pullman & Comley since 1981, recently served as chair of Lambda Legal's national board of directors. He noted that the firm has embraced diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives as well as new legal trends.

"When I joined this firm, it had a reputation as a crusty, white shoe firm," he said. "In the time I've been here, we've expanded to Hartford, Westport and Springfield. [We have] a much more diverse partnership than we've ever had. We encourage diversity. We're forward looking. We're looking forward to legal trends and in our HR practices."

--Editing by Andrew Cohen.

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