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As Competition Builds in the Carolinas, Local Law Firms Merge to Boost Litigation Services

"There is an absolute war for talent in places like Charlotte," said Nexsen Pruet chairman Leighton Lord, whose firm just added seven lawyers in a merger.

By Jacob Polacheck | June 01, 2022



Nexsen Pruet chairman Leighton Lord (left) and Erwin Capitano & Moss managing partner Joe Moss. (Courtesy photos)

Amid fierce law firm competition in the Carolinas, two local ones are merging to offer greater services to clients while also fending off business threats of Am Law 200 firms entering the region.

Columbia, S.C.-based Nexsen Pruet, a 210-attorney firm, added seven lawyers in Charlotte in May when it merged with North Carolina-based firm Erwin, Capitano & Moss. Nexsen Pruet chairman Leighton Lord said his firm primarily merged to gain more litigation capabilities for clients, as larger law firms enter the region.

"We needed more litigation help in North Carolina, especially Charlotte. This is very client-driven for us. We have clients that need that help and want that help," Lord said.

He added that the increased legal industry attention in the Carolinas has been prompted by an uptick in automotive-related work. "We even have Detroit firms that are trying to set up in the Carolinas, because we're starting to be seen as an automotive hub again," he said. "The competition is absolutely fierce."

Lord, who has been practicing in North and South Carolina for 28 years, noted that firms are competing for both client work and top associates. "There is an absolute war for talent in places like Charlotte," he said. "The big money center law firms are just trying to gobble up associates. We have to fight against that."

Charlotte has seen a host of big law firm entrants in recent years. For instance, Greenberg Traurig launched a local office (<https://www.law.com/americanlawyer/2022/04/25/greenberg-traurig-lands-winston-real-estate-finance-group-launches-charlotte-office/>) last month and Wilson Elser Moskowitz Edelman & Dicker entered the city (<https://www.law.com/dailyreportonline/2021/06/01/wilson-elser-opens-two-north-carolina-offices-as-big-law-continues-carolinas-expansion/>) last year, after Offit Kurman and Seyfarth Shaw in recent years. ([https://www.law.com/americanlawyer/2019/07/31/law-firms-are-flocking-to-charlotte-as-the-southeast-flourishes/?](https://www.law.com/americanlawyer/2019/07/31/law-firms-are-flocking-to-charlotte-as-the-southeast-flourishes/?kw=Law%20Firms%20Are%20Flocking%20to%20Charlotte%20as%20the%20Southeast%20Flourishes&utm_so)

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According to ALM data, about 45 NLJ 500 law firms that are not headquartered in Charlotte have offices there now.

Pandemic Factors

Erwin, Capitano & Moss managing partner Joe Moss said the timing of the firms' merger was "dictated by COVID" as the firm did not pursue a merger earlier in the pandemic.

"If we could've done it two months ago, we would have, but it takes a little while to get things in order to shut down our firm and merge and join up with Nexsen Pruet," he said. "They didn't have the kind of business in commercial litigation that we do in Charlotte, so we stepped into that role, and it's a perfect fit."

With gross revenue of \$99.6 million in 2020, Nexsen Pruet is now in the range of \$110 million or \$115 million in revenue, Lord said. "Our revenue has been growing," he added.

Moving forward, Lord said he sees the salary wars for associates and lawyers continuing to pose challenges for law firms. The firm's current base salary for associates is in the range of \$135,000 to \$140,000, but Lord said "it's going to go up."

"Big Law is really pushing the salary envelope, and we're feeling that pressure as a middle-market firm," he said. "Our associates get called and offered jobs with firms like that. We're feeling the pressure from Big Law pushing the salaries so hard."

