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Q&A: Pat Scully, Bernstein Shur's CEO-to-be

BY MATT DODGE

When Pat Scully takes over leadership of Portland law firm Bernstein Shur at the beginning of 2014, it will have been 30 years since he first stepped in the door as a summer clerk in 1983.

After nearly three decades at the firm, Scully made a name for himself in the realm of municipal and energy law, representing energy companies like Statoil on offshore wind projects in the state.

For the past 20 years, Scully has been involved in management of the firm and led its municipal and governmental services practice group. He was named CEO by the firm's board of directors and confirmed by the partners, and will assume the role Jan. 1, 2014.

Scully talked this week with Mainebiz to discuss law, legacy and the future of Bernstein Shur. An edited transcript follows:

Mainebiz: How will your experience with the firm's energy law practice help prepare Bernstein Shur for the future?

Scully: The municipal practice has kind of been the bread and butter practice for us for decades — it goes all the way back to Barney Shur representing the city of Portland — but the energy/regulatory practice is more the practice of the future. It's a little more unique and reflective of the transitions in Maine's economy as we bring in more high-tech business like wind and other types of energy generation. I think that plays well with the firm in the sense that we want to be part of Maine's future, and that kind of [technology] is certainly part of Maine's future.

Why do you think you were picked to be the next CEO of Bernstein Shur?

I think part of it is that I've been involved in the management of the firm for a long time. I have a lot of history with this organization and think I have demonstrated an interest and commitment to the future. I think Charles [Miller, CEO] sees me as someone who can help maintain the success he has brought to this law firm, and who both looks forward and values the culture we have created here.

Is there anything you are just itching to change about how the firm is run or what services it offers?

I see change in our future, but not dramatic change. I think as the legal services environment is getting increasingly competitive, we'll see more competition and clients will want to know whether or not they are getting a good value. We will have to be as nimble and efficient as we possibly can, using technology to the best of our ability to provide clients with solutions. We also want to be looked at not just as a Maine-New Hampshire law firm, but establish a presence nationally.

During his tenure as CEO over the last nine years, Charlie Miller was able to actually grow the number of attorneys practicing with the firm despite an economic recession. Do you plan to maintain this level of growth?

I don't look at growth as an end in itself. We want to be the absolute best firm we can be. If in doing that we grow, that will be great, but I'm not interested in growth for growth's sake. My focus is to identify areas where customers are going to need our service and

Pat Scully has been tapped to take over as CEO of Portland-based law firm Bernstein Shur in 2014. Scully is currently the head of the firm's municipal and governmental services practice group.

enhancing ourselves in that way; my own expectation is that there will be some growth that will happen as a result of that.

What are some current trends in the industry you hope to take advantage of as a firm?

We're actually in the middle of a strategic planning process right now. This is an organization that is very focused on being strategic — which is true of this transition in leadership but also what areas of practice we pursue.

We look at the Maine and New England economy and we try to develop our core areas to where we think things are going. Certainly energy is one of those areas, and health care, and — unfortunately — bankruptcy and insolvency. We have one of the biggest bankruptcy practices in New England — it's now a national practice — and we think that will continue to be the case.

What about your own specialty in the energy sector? Are there any trends you've identified there that might help grow the practice?

Maine has a real opportunity to become an exporter of energy generation for the larger New England/New York part of the Northeast. It also provides us with a great opportunity to become the place where new types of technology are developed ... and be at the forefront of a new industry that could be transformative to our economy.

[Energy] transmission is also an important part of it. There is a need to get power to the places where people need it, and we are seeing more opportunity for companies other than regulated utilities to get into the transmission business. Also, as we start to produce more electricity here, we create the opportunity for changing the way we heat our homes and run our cars.

And how will your firm take advantage of those trends?

There is all kinds of work for lawyers involved in energy. If someone is getting access to places where people want to build these [energy generation projects] they'll need a real estate lawyer; environmental work for getting permits; public policy experts to make sure the public is educated; regulatory work and working with state regulators and utilities to put the rules and contracts in place that allow it all to happen.

Have you had any any role models or mentors during your career at Bernstein Shur?

If I had to pick one, I would probably point to Sumner Bernstein. He went to Harvard law, was a brilliant man, and his ethical and practice quality was just — there was nobody close to him. He had a very high standard of work and considered this firm to be an extension of himself, so the culture and values of this place were extremely important to him. He also taught me that while you can be successful in this career financially, it's important to be really professional and compassionate and demonstrate the kind of values that will make your children and grandchildren proud of you. ■