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TOP CALIFORNIA LAW FIRMS

The Little Land Use Firm That Could

By Susan McRae
Daily Journal Staff Writer

Lawyers at Armbruster Goldsmith & Devac LLP are used to working on eye-catching projects, such as the Hollywood & Vine mixed-use, transit-oriented site that opened last year, and the redevelopment of the Century Plaza Hotel into a hotel-condo-office project, still in the planning stages.

Their latest project may be the most challenging yet: an NFL stadium in downtown Los Angeles, something the city hasn't seen since the Raiders left the Los Angeles Coliseum for Oakland in 1994.

"It's the type of project that proves boutiques can land major clients, and represents a paradigm shift in how clients react to law firms," said managing partner Dale Goldsmith, a firm co-founder.

An indication of this, Goldsmith said, is that 2010 was the firm's busiest year since opening shop in 2004, and it occurred during a down economy in which many big law firms were treading water.

In the new economic realities, clients have become more savvy about choosing legal services and controlling costs. Developers, in particular, tend to be more financially cautious because their businesses are so highly leveraged.

Another factor pushing land-use work toward boutiques is that the practice doesn't lend itself to the mega-firm model of 10 associates per case. Projects are staffed more efficiently and effectively, Goldsmith said, with a few seasoned lawyers who know their way around the minefields of government regulations.

At Armbruster Goldsmith, the five partners and one of counsel have a combined 85 years experience in land-use entitlement work and litigation at large firms.

"When a client calls, they are getting a name partner, in addition to rates that are 25 percent less than our big firm competitors," Goldsmith said.

Some of the firm's projects during the past year include approval for a 158,000-square-



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William F. Delvac, left, Dale Goldsmith, Mark S. Armbruster, and R.J. Comer, stand in front of the Century Plaza Hotel, which they represent.

foot biotechnology campus in Santa Monica for cancer treatment research; approval, after settling a lawsuit by neighborhood groups, of a mixed-use, transit-oriented development near West Hollywood; and approval for a recycling project on a former landfill, after winning dismissal of an environmental lawsuit.

The firm also settled two lawsuits during work on the Hollywood & Vine project, which combines a trendy W Hotel and the historic 1924 Taft Building. The Century Plaza Hotel project finally got the go-ahead after the developer agreed to modernize the hotel instead of demolishing it. Construction isn't expected before the summer of 2012.

Besides litigating its own projects, the firm also gets retained by big law counterparts to litigate their land-use cases. It successfully defended the Museum of Tolerance's expansion on behalf of Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker LLP, and recently settled a lawsuit on behalf of a Latham & Watkins LLP client to allow a mixed-use development to proceed.

The NFL project reunites the lawyers with

Armbruster, Goldsmith & Delvac

Practice Area: Land Use

Number of lawyers: 6

Major Projects: Hollywood & Vine; Century Plaza Hotel; Staples Center, Home Depot Center, Dodger Stadium; L.A. Live Theatre; Museum of Tolerance expansion; Santa Monica Place

longtime client Anschutz Entertainment Group, for which the firm won entitlements to build Staples Center, L.A. Live Theatre and the Home Depot Center sports complex in Carson.

Goldsmith ticked off names of sports-related developments the firm has worked on: Staples Center, Dodger Stadium, Home Depot Center and now a potential new football stadium.

"When it's finished," he said, "we'll be able to letter in four sports."