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# Against the odds - a top boutique law firm serving local government survives 20 years

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Public Law Group is a law firm representing primarily local government agencies, educational institutions, and nonprofits in the San Francisco Bay Area, California's Central Valley and Southern California.

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Growing up in Brooklyn it was often said: "You can't fight City Hall." Experience in local government often makes me feel that the opposite is true - City Hall has a lot of trouble doing its job and everyone wants to fight - even insiders. I often say government needs a friend.

It may seem odd to some that representing City Hall is a public interest practice. But, when you think about it, local government provides essential services to the residents, and particularly, to poor and middle-class residents. These include the obvious candidates such as protecting public safety, parks, social services, hospitals, libraries, water, sewers, roads, mass transportation, and so on. But it also may include creating laws prohibiting discrimination, protecting privacy, setting minimum wages, protecting abortion clinics, and ensuring fair contracting. And, starting in the 1980s, lawyers representing local government had been in the vanguard of protecting consumers and suing private corporations such as tobacco and pharmaceutical companies for the health effects of their products. In short, traditional public interest litigation. This year, the firm celebrated two major successes - settlement in litigation against JUUL and opioid distributors - and shared a Clay Award with the San Francisco City Attorney's Office. The firm also partnered with the San Francisco City Attorney's Office to keep the doors open at the city's Laguna Honda hospital, a facility that provides long-term health care to low-income patients.

The roots of the current Renne Public Law Group date to 2002 when Louise Renne decided not to run for a fifth term as San Francisco City Attorney and started the firm along with a number of her former deputies. Our intention was to provide much the same kind of services to other local governments that we had provided through the City Attorney's Office of San Francisco. These services include government law, constitutional law, statutory drafting, labor and employment law, land use law, and both affirmative and defensive litigation. Although the firm has gone through a number of iterations since 2002, the purpose has remained largely the same.

One thing we learned in San Francisco, however, is that many of the legal problems local governments face require solutions that lawyers are not necessarily best equipped to deliver. One of our early innovations was the recognition that our services needed to be accompanied with the services of non-lawyer experts, including former city managers, finance and human resources professionals, and policy, human resources, and financial analysts. In its current incarnation, these functions reside in our wholly owned subsidiary, Renne Public Management Group.

We also realized that some of the challenges local governments face come from Sacramento. On the positive side, however, Sacramento is also a potential source of badly needed local funding and grants. That led to the creation of a lobbying division of our firm, Renne Public Policy Group, which is located in Sacramento. The group has since taken on the role of assisting local governments to obtain grants.

Work for local government is challenging because local governments are not able to pay high rates, and many lawyers are financially driven. In addition, government has lost much of the luster that it once had. When was the last time you heard government in the same sentence as "the best and the brightest?" So, recruitment of the top-tier lawyers our work demands is always a challenge. It is also challenging because many graduates of top law schools have grown up thinking that the only acceptable government job is a high-level federal job. When I graduated from Stanford Law School, I certainly felt that way. But then I clerked for the California Supreme Court, and realized how important local governments are in California. Just a few months ago we were gratified by a "shout-out" from the Supreme Court, which observed:

Local governments make many of the most important decisions that affect Californians' everyday lives. They build and repair public streets; define a neighborhood's character through planning and zoning, and they decide where to place public parks and where to allow restaurants, bars, and liquor stores to operate. They make decisions about public transit and decide where to site industries that cause pollution. They provide police services; determine the level and type of policing and other first responder services; educate our children; operate or regulate local utilities, and they have the power to levy taxes. (*Pico Neighborhood Associate v. City of Santa Monica* (2023).)

The truth is that local government - more than the federal government, and for that matter the state government - has more of an effect on the daily lives of most people. And, the federal government has certainly not been a model of functionality. Local government is not perfect either, but, when the bus does not show up, that failure is at least apparent to the public. There are also intractable problems, like homelessness and the mental health crisis, that will require greater help from our dysfunctional federal government. But, when all is said and done, local government is the government residents know. And polls continue to show that, despite all the problems, it has a better reputation than the state or federal governments.

If there is one thing that those of us who work with local government can say for ourselves, it is that what we do, even as individuals, makes a substantial difference - a difference that, at the end of the day, we can point to and say, we did that. For a lawyer, it is also at the top of the intellectual spectrum. Government problems are complex. But we are addicted to solving them. That's what drives highly-qualified people - lawyers and non-lawyers - to this practice and holds us together. Seemingly, against the odds.

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