

California Powerhouse: Coblentz

By **Dave Simpson**

Law360, Los Angeles (October 2, 2017, 4:05 PM EDT) -- When California sports teams with championship arena dreams need legal advice on how to knock it out of the park on their new park, they know to call Coblentz Patch Duffy & Bass LLP, who earlier this year landed the Los Angeles Clippers as yet another major league client.

The firm had been deeply involved in complex land deals before leveraging that into work for San Francisco's professional football and baseball teams as they built their arenas, laying the groundwork for its role in the Clippers' proposed basketball stadium and landing among Law360's California Powerhouses.

Co-Managing Partner Jeff Knowles told Law360 that the firm's experience in land-use structuring deals makes it an attractive choice for teams like the Clippers, which asked the 80-attorney firm to help with their new stadium about three months ago.



Coblentz made its first move into stadium work in the mid 90's when took on the Giant's AT&T Park, which opened in San Francisco in 2001. At the time, they were not masters of the sports arena, but they were counsel for the master developer of the Mission Bay project, next to the ballpark's footprint.

The firm was a natural fit for the Giants' new ballpark "because we had such a great reputation in land use in general, so we're kind of the go-to folks for big projects," Knowles said.

"Back then, we were even smaller, maybe 40 lawyers, and we're still one of the largest real estate practices, even when comparing to the largest firms in town," he said.

The success of the Giants' new ballpark led to much of the signature work the firm has taken on in the last year: Coblentz is the lead counsel in a mixed-use project next to AT&T Park, owned by a Giants' affiliate, that would add up to about 2,000 residential units and 1.36 million gross square feet of commercial development to a nearby pier.

And they have represented the San Francisco 49ers in real estate, corporate and litigation work related to the team's development of its new \$1.3 billion stadium in Santa Clara — a project that came in about five years ago. And as with the Giants, the relationship with the 49ers has led to current spin-off work, Co-Managing Partner Danna Kozerski told Law360.

For instance, Coblentz is representing the Niners in its suit against Santa Clara County over valuation of the new stadium for tax purposes, Co-Managing Partner Alan Gennis explained.

“That work also has a lot of family corporate ownership structuring work,” Kozerski said. “It has lots of tax work that comes out of that, with respect to the stadium itself, and it has some complicated ground-lease rent structuring that's been recently challenged, and we're involved in that.”

The firm has been based in San Francisco since Samuel Jacobs, its founder, began practicing in 1890. He was joined by his brother Oscar in 1905. One of the firm's namesakes, the late William Coblentz, joined the firm in the mid-1950s.

Coblentz has three former assistant U.S. attorneys on its roster, but, Knowles said, the firm is also a notable farm team for the judicial benches. Two Coblentz alumni are magistrate judges, and three are district judges in Northern District of California.

"Several of them recuse themselves when our cases come up, which is a disadvantage, because they're great judges," he said, laughing.

Senior U.S. District Judge Charles R. Breyer and U.S. District Judges Edward M. Chen and William H. Orrick worked previously as litigators for Coblentz.

And William Coblentz had planted seeds the firm has seen continue to sprout since his death in 2010. He represented a slew of musicians through his connection to legendary concert promoter Bill Graham, and to this day, classic concert posters line the walls of the firm's San Francisco office.

Music remains a central part of the firm's work, Knowles said. Last year, it helped Sony Music Entertainment settle a case against the biggest webcaster in the world, Radionomy, which Sony claimed was webcasting unlicensed recordings.

Meanwhile, Coblentz's future looks Californian. The firm has offices all over the Bay Area and Silicon Valley but, Knowles said, is primarily concentrated in San Francisco. In 2016, however, the firm launched a new major office in Napa Valley with a focus on wine, food, beverage, real estate development and hospitality.

“That's our first foray into what I would call a different market,” Kozerski said.

The new office has resulted in many new projects, including a complicated hotel transaction in Calistoga, California, that was completed earlier this year, she said.

Coblentz is currently representing a joint venture that last month got approval from the city of Napa to develop its entire downtown civic area, adding a new hotel and residential units, Kozerski said.

The firm already had some clients in the area and saw an opportunity to develop a local reputation by moving an office there, Gennis said, with some of the partners wanting to practice up there.

The firm had hired a “key lateral” who knew the market and a group of partners willing to expand, Gennis said.

“We had the critical mass to do it,” he said. “We’re trying to build the relationships with the existing clients but use that as a platform to bring in more wine country-based clients.”

--Editing by Philip Shea.

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