

# LAW WEEK COLORADO

## Brownstein's Transition at the Top

*Managing partner Rich Benenson discusses the Denver firm's goals*

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Although the leadership transition at Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck was announced in January, Rich Benenson is just settling into his new role.

On July 1, Benenson took over as managing partner from Adam Agron who had been in the role since 2013. He said the goals for the firm as he takes the wheel involve largely staying the course. Benenson said the firm intends to continue doing what it has been doing in its strategic growth and investing in talent.

### LOBBYING SUCCESS

Despite its Denver roots, Brownstein is largely known nationally for its lobbying clout. That showed in mid-July when the firm announced it brought in more than \$10 million in revenue through its lobbying work for the second quarter of 2019, topping the list of lobbying firms and edging out the former leader, Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, according to Lobbying Disclosure Act reporting.

Benenson emphasized that the No. 1 distinction is just for the quarter, but he said he attributes the growth to the firm's "atypical approach."

"We have a bipartisan bicameral approach to the lobby space, and we've done well with that," Benenson said. "Where we land on the revenue list obviously has some import to us, but it's not driving the train. We're happy when we see this number at No. 1, but we'd be equally happy, I think, to see strong performance at No. 2. The key for us is that we're seeing incremental growth, smart growth, incremental revenue and more profit coming out of that operation."

### STRATEGIC GROWTH

Benenson said one of his primary goals is to continue the firm's strategic growth in practice areas that are "legitimately preeminent" and to grow those practices in geographic areas that support them. In addition to growing the government practice in Washington, D.C., Benenson also highlighted its real estate, gaming, cannabis, outdoor recreation and middle mar-

ket private equity M&A group practices.

Some of those growth strategies are already coming to fruition. The firm on Wednesday announced that it formalized its cannabis work as a practice area for the firm with a cannabis and industrialized hemp industry group, focused on working on the "full spectrum of clients in the space, both those directly touching the plant and those tangential to the industry or impacted by it."

And while Benenson said the firm plans to grow in "geographies that support" those practices, he didn't say whether that means expanding its existing geographic footprint.

"More than a decade ago, we didn't have a strong California presence. A long while ago, we didn't have a Las Vegas presence," Benenson said. "Some of our current structure is really about smart growth, so we're constantly looking at that. We've not found the fits or the right opportunities, but that doesn't mean next quarter, next year or five years down the road, we won't find another opportunity again."

Benenson said focusing on the firm's prime areas for growth also help recruiting as well. Although he said the firm is successful in recruiting in its primary jurisdictions, the firm also saw it necessary to raise starting associate salaries in order to compete with the "wickedly competitive and dynamic" national market. In 2016, several national BigLaw firms competed with each other in raising first-year associate salaries, eventually topping out at \$190,000. Some Denver law firms, including Brownstein, offered raises at that time, but Brownstein again raised its associate salaries in July, bumping starting associate salaries by \$15,000 and adjusting senior associate salaries.

"Where we felt particularly under attack was on the economics," Benenson said. "We found as a result, for the first time, really in my history at the firm, that we were just not quite as competitive as we expect to be when it came to recruiting. ... We've already seen a real improvement in our recruiting perspective and success as a result of fixing that gap."

### DIVERSITY INITIATIVES

Brownstein has been involved on the diversity front on issues addressing women in



the workplace. The firm was one of the Mansfield Rule certified firms for 2018, and Benenson said he expects it will be again for 2019. He also highlighted a list of other programs at the firm, such as the Women's Leadership Initiative to promote women within the firm and its "Transitions Matter" program to help mothers return to work after taking time off for child birth. Benenson also mentioned its existing business development and recruitment programs that focus on improv-

ing diversity that the firm plans to continue to expand.

"Diversity is not just a good thing to do for all the social and inclusiveness reasons, but it's actually good for business," he said. "Our clients are demanding it, it is driving more opportunities to the firm, and we've experienced the upside of diversity on our business. We're invested, we're committed, we're going to keep doing that." •

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