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Experience benefits his clients

By Bethany Krajelis
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John E. Stevens remembers exactly when he fell for the law.

He was 13 years old and his father took him out of school for an entire week to watch a criminal trial that he was participating in as a juror.

"I was just fascinated by all of it," said Stevens, a lawyer-lobbyist with Freeborn & Peters LLP in Springfield. "But, when I got to law school, I realized my strengths were not in the courtroom."

With that in mind, Stevens decided to combine his undergraduate degree in business with his law degree to create a specialized practice for himself. It became even more specialized after spending more than 20 years learning the ins and outs of state government as legal counsel to two comptrollers, an attorney general and the governor's budget office.

"I made it my speciality to know where the state's money came from and where it was spent," said Stevens, who also was heavily involved in procurement issues during his time as a government lawyer.

Now, Stevens harnesses his experience with the state's executive branch to help his clients, many of whom are seeking to or are already doing business with the state, navigate the regulatory and legislative processes.

Among others, his clients include the world's third largest lottery provider, Interlot, United Healthcare Services Inc. and several clients in regulated industries, such as waste haulers and landfill operators.

"For years, companies would shun doing business with the state," Stevens said, referring to the low rates and the complicated and competitive process. "During the entire course of my practice, I have seen the pendulum swing."

"As the economy has been bumping up along the bottom, many businesses are focusing their attention on state government as a potential business partner," he said. "And I'm the one they call on to help them get through the regulatory side of things, help them understand the personalities of the people involved and to know what all the rules are."

Dave Stricklin of Stricklin & Associates, a Chicago-based public affairs company, said there is no substitute for experience, which is something he says Stevens is full of.

He has known Stevens for years, but began



John E. Stevens
Lawyer-lobbyist

Age: 57.

Career highlights: attorney, Legislative Reference Bureau; chief legal counsel to former Illinois Comptroller and Attorney General Roland W. Burris, as well as former Comptroller Loleta A. Didrickson; chief legal counsel to the Illinois Office of Management and Budget (formerly the Illinois Bureau of the Budget); legal advisor, Procurement Policy Board; and lawyer-lobbyist, Freeborn & Peters LLP.

Law school: Northern Illinois University College of Law, 1978.

Interests: Spending time with his wife, Patricia, and their four children, who got him into camping, duck hunting, motor sports and dog training.

working with him more closely a year or two ago through a shared client.

"I think he's done a terrific job and has exceeded the high expectations I had set," Stricklin said. "John is obviously a gifted attorney, which never

continued...

hurts, but he also is realistic and practical person.”

Stevens’ career in state government began in 1978, when he earned his law degree from Northern Illinois University College of Law and took a job with the Legislative Reference Bureau (LRB).

At the LRB, which is a nonpartisan state agency that drafts legislation and provides legal advice to lawmakers, Stevens had his hand in legislation on some of the state’s more controversial and complicated issues, such as pension and tax issues.

He took that experience with him to the Illinois comptroller’s office, where he served as Roland W. Burris’ associate legal counsel. Within a year, he was named chief legal counsel.

Stevens stayed with Burris for the remainder of his term in the comptroller’s office and in 1991, followed him to the Illinois attorney general’s office.

In that role, Stevens helped write legislation that led to the creation of the state’s Bill of Rights for Victims and Witnesses of Violent Crime. He was also deeply involved in securing statewide grand jury powers for his boss and the attorneys general that followed him.

After working in a Democratic administration for 16 years, Stevens woke up seeing red one morning in 1994. Republicans won all of the state’s constitutional offices in that election.

Luckily for him, the new comptroller, Loleta A. Didrickson, didn’t let the political affiliations of his previous bosses get in the way of hiring Stevens

as her chief legal counsel.

Stevens stayed with Didrickson until her term came to an end in 1999, after which time he went to work for another Republican as deputy counsel to former Gov. George H. Ryan’s budget office. He also later served as outside counsel to former Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich’s budget office.

In 1995, Stevens decided to leave state government to utilize his experience as a lawyer/lobbyist with Freeborn & Peters LLP.

“It’s not very different,” he said. “I simply moved, in many respects, to the other side of the table.”

While the issues he works on as a lobbyist are the same as the ones he worked on as a government lawyer, Stevens said his focus now is on the interests of businesses rather than the state.

Eric M. Madiar, chief legal counsel to Senate President John J. Cullerton’s office, has known Stevens for most of his professional career.

Madiar worked at Freeborn & Peters for four years before joining the Senate Democratic staff.

“John has great insight into the legislative process,” Madiar said, adding that his former boss is an expert on the state’s procurement code and is “a person of unrivaled character.”

As a member of the firm’s government and regulatory law practice group, Madiar worked closely with Stevens and Roger H. Bickel, who is based out of the firm’s Chicago office.

Working with them, Madiar said, “provided me with the invaluable experience and mentoring to succeed in my current position.”