

Freeborn Doubles Down On NY Footprint With Bigger Office

By **Justin Wise**

Law360 (April 12, 2021, 12:38 PM EDT) -- Chicago-founded Freeborn & Peters LLP said Monday it's moving into a larger office in New York City, as the mid-sized firm doubles down on a region it expanded into in 2017 with only four lawyers and expects to substantially grow in the years ahead.

"I think this office space is a tangible application of our commitment to that [growth]," New York managing partner Sean Keely said in an interview.

The move to a new midtown Manhattan office comes as the New York legal market only gets more competitive, following a particularly strong financial year for many of the major U.S. law firms. But Keely said he sees a place in this environment for the firm, which is actively recruiting lawyers to help the New York office become a full-service shop like its Chicago headquarters.

The new space will accommodate up to 30 lawyers, Keely noted, suggesting the firm plans to at least double its New York attorney headcount from the 12 currently based there. Just in the past seven months, the office hired a pair of labor and employment lawyers and Delphine Knight Brown, a veteran intellectual property partner who came over from Axinn Veltrop & Harkrider LLP.

"I can't say we're going to double in the next year, but I can say absolutely the plans are for us to continue that commitment to growing in New York," said Keely, who also heads Freeborn's reinsurance subgroup. "Any talented lawyer that's looking to grow his or her practice and wants to be a part of an entrepreneurial firm ... should be looking at us."

Keely joined Freeborn in 2017, months after it **merged with four-lawyer boutique** Hargraves McConnell & Costigan PC to establish a New York presence. The office began with a core focus on insurance and reinsurance litigation services. Since then, it has expanded in commercial litigation, labor and employment, real estate, IP and life sciences.

Keely said commercial litigation is a core firm strength and that the office is eyeing growth that complements corporate focuses in its five U.S. offices. Insurance and reinsurance arbitration remains the New York office's busiest practice, Keely said, noting that even as court activity slowed down during the pandemic, reinsurance arbitrations did not.

While the pandemic provoked questions about more flexible remote working policies, Keely said he never had second thoughts about expanding the firm's real estate footprint in New York. He's also confident about Freeborn's ability to win over capable lawyers to fill that space.

The insurance litigator is a BigLaw alum, coming over to Freeborn from Hogan Lovells in 2017. He said he was attracted by the chance to grow the firm in New York and develop his practice in a way that's different from a traditional big firm.

Trends in the market over the last 10 years, including businesses more tightly monitoring their legal spending, have presented good opportunities for shops like Freeborn, he said. Attorneys **have also noted that advancements** in legal technology are narrowing some administrative gaps between BigLaw and smaller firms.

"I think the continued focus on how much of it and how smartly [businesses are] spending their money has given real opportunities to mid-sized firms like ours that can be flexible and can offer alternative arrangements," Keely said. "We can provide a real value proposition in terms of rate structure without the significant overhead of BigLaw."

Freeborn declined to disclose figures on its 2020 financial performance. Keely said the firm enjoyed a "good year" and that its core insurance practices have remained busy into 2021.

--Additional reporting by Rick Archer. Editing by Alyssa Miller.