

Office Snapshot: Sterne Kessler's New DC Digs

By Jack Rodgers

Law360 (June 13, 2024, 4:16 PM EDT) -- Sterne Kessler Goldstein & Fox PLLC made a major investment in amenities as it recently relocated its Washington, D.C., office: A barista is on staff to whip up lattes, and an in-house wellness center is staffed by a nurse practitioner who can prescribe medication.

According to the firm's leaders, it's an investment that's paying dividends so far in terms of staff attendance.

"We don't have these fake [mandatory in-office policies] that people don't pay attention to, or they're upset about," Robert Burger, the firm's chief operating officer, told Law360 Pulse in a recent interview. "People want to come in because they want to be a part of this."

The D.C.-based Sterne Kessler, which specializes in intellectual property work, picked 1101 K Street NW as its new home base for the building's myriad features, like its floor-to-ceiling glass windows and custom furniture. But Sterne Kessler also invested in designing and constructing the location to the firm's specifications.

The firm started construction on the space in February 2023, and it officially moved in last August, as offices and workstations were continuing to be completed.

Sterne Kessler started looking at moving from its previous location — 1100 New York Avenue NW, the former Greyhound building that the firm had called home for 30 years — before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The firm's lease was up, and Burger said it was time to look in a forward-thinking way about the firm's office space.

"Wayne Gretzky says, 'A good hockey player plays where the puck is now, but a great one plays where the puck is going,'" Burger said. "And so we really tried to design [the] space where the puck is going."

The firm's search for a new space went on despite pandemic lockdowns, and Burger recalled touring offices with Sterne Kessler managing director Mike Ray while wearing three layers of face masks.

"I don't think there was anyone in D.C. at the time that was looking at real estate when we were looking, because no one knew what was going on," Burger said. "We decided to explore and see what was happening and see what was good for Sterne Kessler."

To research what they might want in their own space, the team traveled to several office spaces in London and New York.

By including amenities like private dining spaces and "zen rooms," or small spaces with intimate lighting that staff can use to take breaks, Sterne Kessler wanted to invest in what it believes to be the future of office space.

But Burger and Ray said moving forward with their vision for the office felt like a gamble during the uncertainty of the pandemic.

"We made the decision at the worst of COVID when nobody was signing leases and nobody was going to the office," Ray said. "That was a big, bold decision. Was it the right decision? Time will tell."

So far, however, Burger said it felt like a bet they had won.

"We have a much higher rate of attendance because people want to come in because it's [a] great space," he said.

Here, Law360 Pulse takes a look at Sterne Kessler's new space in the nation's capital.

The Leader

Ray has worked with the firm for more than 35 years, joining in 1989 as a summer associate. He's in his 18th year as managing director.

Like many of the firm's IP attorneys, Ray has a science background, having studied electrical engineering at the University of New Hampshire. It wasn't until after he graduated that he considered pursuing a career in law, and he said it was a transition that felt awkward at first.

"I remember my first year in law school, I felt like a fish out of water, like I didn't belong, like I was the only one who had ever done this," Ray said. "And fast-forward, here I am at a law firm of like-minded people with similar backgrounds who all do the same thing."



Mike Ray

Ray's practice largely focuses on electronics-related IP matters, including counseling clients on how to protect their patents. He also assists clients with patent portfolio development, and counsels clients on patent post-grant proceedings before the U.S. Patent Trial and Appeal Board.

The Location

K Street is well known in D.C. for playing host to high-profile lobbying shops and law firms.

Sterne Kessler occupies the top four floors of the building at the corner of K and 12th streets. While the building, which was constructed in 2006, is technically listed at 10 stories with a small roof deck, the firm's build-out of the space included the addition of an 11th story penthouse that serves as the main reception area. The new space — which houses the firm's coffee bar — boasts outdoor workspaces and panoramic views of city landmarks like the Washington National Monument and the U.S. Capitol building.

The office is near Thomas Circle Park, a well-known D.C. landmark and neighborhood, and is near several hotels, making it easily accessible for visiting clients or attorneys.

The building is about four blocks away from several Metro stations, including McPherson Square and Metro Center — the hub of the system and one of the larger connecting stations in D.C.

While the new space is only two blocks away from Sterne Kessler's office on New York Avenue, the transition has been a big change for attorneys like Ray who have been with the firm for years.

"I remember as a young associate moving into that space," Ray said. "It became part of who we were, part of our identity was that building, so to move was a huge deal for us, a lot of change for everyone."

Sterne Kessler is also doing more with less space at 1101 K Street. While the firm's previous location had 122,000 square feet of space and about 18 conference rooms, its new space encompasses only 76,000 square feet, but boasts 28 conference, meeting and team rooms, Burger said.

Each of the 28 rooms comes equipped with technology to make it simple to participate in video meetings, and the firm said it consulted with an audio and visual specialist to install dynamic cameras that focus on the person speaking.

While there are traditional corner offices, the firm almost exclusively uses a hoteling system for reserving work space, meaning Sterne Kessler staff aren't assigned to one permanent space when they're working in person.

Wellness is a central focus of the firm's space. The building has a bike room — a designated space for staff who want to ride their bicycle to work — which includes a shower and lockers. There's also a fitness center, including a space full of stationary bikes.

The firm's wellness center, meanwhile, operates as a partnership between Sterne Kessler, CloseKnit and CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield. While not entirely free to employees, Burger said that being able to be seen in-office by a medical professional wasn't an attempt to offset the firm's healthcare costs.

"Having a nurse practitioner that's here full time on our team, that can prescribe, that can help out with appointments, that can help out with insurance issues, has been such an added benefit," Burger said.

Some of the office's other amenities include gender-neutral bathrooms, a mock trial room, and a studio room equipped with high-quality sound and lighting equipment for making presentations.

"We experimented with different types of meeting space," Burger said. "Some rooms have couches and tables ... It's appealing to different generations and in this post-COVID environment, people want to come in and communicate and get to know each other and build relationships and teams and talk about issues in a little bit different of a forum."

The Team

Directors: 78

Counsel: 27

Associates: 58

Tech Specialists: 15

Patent Agents: 18
Professional Staff: 253
Summer Associates: 15

The Work

As an IP-focused firm, Sterne Kessler's attorneys represent clients in patent and trademark litigation, prosecution and other matters, generally working before the Patent Trial and Appeal Board or in federal district court.

The firm also helps clients protect their trademarks and brands, and offers opinions and advice on IP-related due diligence matters.

"Most of our attorneys are engineers and scientists. Some of them have master's degrees. We have over 55 Ph.D.s that are lawyers as well," Burger said. "It's a very competitive area and we retain our people a lot more than market standards. Our staff retention rate is incredibly high."

Ray said he'd seen the firm grow considerably since he joined in the late 1980s.

The firm was then primarily known for helping clients draft and prosecute patent applications, and to analyze patents for infringement by others. Since then, the firm diversified its practice to a range of IP-related matters, and today, the firm does patent, trademark, copyright and trade secret matters, among others.

Some of the firm's clients include Adidas AG, Emergent BioSolutions Inc., Therabody and Volkswagen Group of America. In 2020, the firm worked on patent matters related to the inventions of Nobel Prize-winning scientists Jennifer A. Doudna and Emmanuelle Charpentier, who helped create CRISPR-Cas9 gene-editing technology.

In April, the firm secured a victory for Teva Pharmaceuticals in an infringement suit brought by Vanda Pharmaceuticals over generic sleeping drug patents. Sterne Kessler also notched a win last November as it convinced a jury to award \$83.4 million in damages to firm client TwinStrand Biosciences on infringement claims related to cancer-screening products.

"We're diverse within IP, which makes us very strong, but I think equally as important, we're diverse across industries," Ray said.

Comings and Goings

In 2022, Sterne Kessler hired Jennifer Meyer Chagnon, a former administrative patent judge, as a member of the firm's electronics practice group. Yuan Liang, who spent more than a year and a half with Sterne Kessler, left the firm in March to move to Ambrose Mills & Lazarow PLLC.

In April 2022, the firm hired Christina Dashe as counsel in the firm's trial and appellate practice group. Stephanie L. Elmer, who serves as a counsel in the firm's biotechnology and chemical practice, rejoined the firm in 2022 after having worked with Sterne Kessler as an associate between 2007 and 2017, a firm spokesperson told Law360 Pulse.

Some of the firm's other recent additions include Tom Fiala, who first joined Sterne Kessler in 2000 as an

associate, but who rejoined the firm last February as its electronics group director. Jessica Harrison, an electronics practice group counsel, joined the firm last year and brought with her more than 25 years of experience working with the USPTO.

The firm also expanded its biotechnology and chemical practice group in 2022, adding Bryan K. Hsu to the team to focus on the preparation and prosecution of U.S. and foreign patent applications.

--Additional reporting by Alison Knezevich and Adam Lidgett. Editing by Kelly Duncan.

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