

August 25, 2011

## Merger creates Fort Lauderdale legal powerhouse

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Jesse Diner

Fort Lauderdale-based Atkinson Diner Stone Mankuta & Ploucha will merge with statewide firm Fowler White Boggs, creating a powerhouse Fort Lauderdale office with two former Florida Bar presidents.

The merger agreement signed last week means the Atkinson Diner firm will disappear from the legal landscape after 45 years, with all 12 lawyers joining Fowler White.

The merger will boost the Fort Lauderdale office of Fowler White to 30 lawyers, prompting the firm to lease a third floor at 1200 E. Las Olas Blvd. It will bring the Tampa-based law firm 142 lawyers in five offices, including Fort Myers, Jacksonville and Tallahassee.

The expanded firm will boast former Bar presidents Terry Russell, who served in 2001, and Jesse Diner, who served in 2009. Russell, who spent four decades at Ruden McClosky, launched a Fort Lauderdale office for Fowler White last year, bringing a handful of Ruden lawyers along.



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Terry Russell of Fowler White Boggs said his statewide firm fits well with Adele Stone's firm Atkinson Diner Stone Mankuta & Ploucha.

Fowler White has been looking to expand in South Florida for several years and had previously talked to the Atkinson Diner firm about a merger, among other firms. Russell, who for years has been good friends with Diner and his wife and law partner, Adele Stone, escalated the merger talks while at the recent Florida Bar annual conference in Orlando.

"All of a sudden the talks got serious," Russell said. "They concluded they wanted a bigger platform. We'll fit together very well. It's a perfect fit."

Atkinson Diner, which was founded 45 years ago in Hollywood by Wilson Atkinson, had been approached by many law firms about a merger over the last 25 years but was never interested, said Stone.

"When we were approached by Fowler White Boggs, we both found we have an awful lot in common," Stone said. "We were both seeking to grow in Broward County. They offer us a larger platform. They have a strong commitment to the community and a strong commitment to The Bar, to business and the practice of law. It's a perfect fit."

Atkinson Diner, which moved from Hollywood to downtown Fort Lauderdale several years ago, has a lease at the Landmark Bank Building which expires in June. That's why the merger will be formally completed July 1.

In addition to Diner, Atkinson Diner boasts such influential lawyers as Stone, who was recently elected to the Florida Bar Board of Governors and president of the Florida chapter of NAOIP, the commercial real estate development association. Former Florida Attorney General Bob Butterworth is of counsel at Atkinson Diner.

The firms said the lawyers of the newly combined entity will continue to focus on legal practice areas that serve key components of the state's economy. Those areas include business and construction litigation, land use, real estate, corporate, immigration, tax, intellectual property, health care and wealth management.

Fowler White's clients include Bank of America, BankAtlantic, Broward County, Citibank, NBC-Universal, Nextel Communications, U.S. Sugar, Tampa International Airport and Pulte Homes.

Atkinson Diner represents Goya Foods, the Bank of Mongolia and Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville Hollywood Beach Resort, a planned development on Hollywood Beach.

The merger makes good sense, according to longtime South Florida legal headhunters.

"It just continues to increase Fowler White's Florida presence," said Joe Ankus of Weston-based Ankus Consulting. "It continues their movement south basically and further solidifies their stake in the South Florida market."

Abbe Bunt of Hollywood-based Bunt Legal Search said the merger creates a firm with a great deal of political clout and cachet, boasting two former Florida Bar presidents as well as a former Florida attorney general.

"This creates quite a political powerhouse in terms of winning government contracts," she said.

"This will be a firm with great cachet."