

Landing and Keeping Government Legal Work

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At the Fort Lauderdale-based Becker firm, **Bernie Friedman** chairs the government law and lobbying practice group, one of the firm's five core practice areas. He has been a lawyer-lobbyist for almost 35 years after serving as chief of staff to U.S. Rep. Larry Smith in the 1980s. The firm represents more than 30 government bodies before the state and federal government and local governments before county commissions.

"Most city attorneys and county attorneys and school board attorneys know of our prowess in that arena," Friedman said. Procurement is a major element of the practice with the firm representing dozens of contractors, architects, engineers and large companies bidding for contracts and challenging or defending contract awards.

Exposure to firm attorneys often comes from service on nonprofit boards ranging from United Way to the Urban League.

The firm benefits from being "very nimble and hands on," Friedman said. "We don't have this whole corporate structure where there's 20 people on this board in Ohio or Pennsylvania" who need to be consulted before making a decision.

With so many government clients, the firm has grown organically by expanding its lobbying work, for instance, from the state to federal level.

"Each pursuit has its own playbook, and there are different strengths and weaknesses for each pursuit, and there's no set formula or magic sauce," he said.

One of the common denominators for firms with a government practice is adapting to the regular changes in elected officials.

“In addition to the personal rapport that you may have with a top decisionmaker for a client, you have to rebuild those relationships regularly because that top decisionmaker is constantly changing,” Miller said. “You’re constantly proving yourself again and again. And you are not just tending an individual relationship. You are tending relationships on all that collegial board.”

Accepting, even anticipating, change in political leadership is part of the job.

“If there’s a new mayor in town, there’s a new mayor in town. We will meet with the new mayor — dutch treat” in compliance with Florida’s tough lobbying rules, Friedman said. “I don’t buy coffee, not even a bottle of water.”

“We’re governed by whatever priorities the mayor and the commission ultimately determine are the priorities,” he said. “We’re really mercenaries that go off to battle, and the city gives us our marching orders.”

Becker has about 25 board-certified construction lawyers, probably the most in the southeastern U.S. and “for sure Florida,” said Friedman.

Friedman sees an advantage in the group’s diversity along racial, ethnic and partisan lines.

“I don’t even think we did it deliberately,” he said. “I don’t think it was a strategy. It happened organically because it was the right thing to do.”

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