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Wed Dec 21st, 2022 | Categories: Firm News |

LOS ANGELES & SAN FRANCISCO
Daily Journal
www.dailyjournal.com
MONDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2022

PERSPECTIVE

Problem Solvers

Attorneys at Bick Law help companies manage or avoid liability in environmental challenges.

By Shane Nelson
Special to the Daily Journal


Kimberly and Alan Bick | Thomas Kurtz / Special to the Daily Journal

Environmental law attorney Kimberly L. Bick started out as a tree hugger. "I thought I would work for the EPA or the Sierra Club or something like that," Bick said with a chuckle. "That was my plan."

After completing an undergraduate degree in earth sciences and her masters in civil engineering at Stanford in 1985, Bick went to work for the McDonnell Douglas Corp. as an environmental engineer, tackling all the company's compliance work for the West Coast.

"I was not a lawyer, but I would deal with whatever legal issues were coming up that needed to be handled from a technical side," Bick explained. "And working in the industry was an eye opener because I was able to see there's a lot of nuance to issues related to the environment and how you best manage environmental issues. There's a lot of incidental costs and other externalities we don't always think about. And I had a real education in the time I was in the engineering field, learning about the multiple sides of every issue."

Bick said she also learned pretty quickly that if she really wanted to make a change within a company, she needed to have a law license, so she enrolled at Stanford Law School, where she graduated in 1990. Earlier in her career, Bick worked at large law firms, often helping businesses manage environmental legal challenges.

"I think it's the problem-solving aspect of it I like the best," she explained. "Trying to keep the client's cost down, but still solve a problem to protect the environment, in the long run, is not an easy task. A lot of times, it seems like it's almost impossible. That challenge is what really I enjoy, and I think that's why I keep doing it."

In 2015, Bick decided to hang her own shingle, launching Bick Law LLP in Newport Beach, in part because doing environmental work at a big firm was becoming increasingly difficult due to hourly rates and other conflicts.

"I thought I could probably do better at reaching clients I wanted to reach if I had more flexibility in my rate structure," Bick said.

Today the firm handles primarily compliance, transactional and litigation-related environmental issues for businesses as well as some municipalities.

"Basically, any business that touches environmental issues — whether that business has property or is an operator of a facility or creates products — they come to us to help them," Bick said. "Either managing those environmental issues, managing the liability related to them or getting them out of the liability entirely in some cases."

The firm is home to five attorneys, including co-managing partner Alan N. Bick, who spent 25 years practicing environmental law at Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher LLP before joining his wife, Kimberly, at Bick Law in 2016. The Bicks were study partners at Stanford Law School and married in 1991.

"You never know if it's going to work out," Alan Bick said, chuckling about his decision to go to work with his wife. "But it's been great."

The Bicks noted that while they try not bring work home with them, cases do occasionally get discussed away from the office.

"It's inevitable that we talk about cases at home, but generally, I'm probably better at leaving stuff at work," Alan Bick said. "When I get home, I generally check out and watch football or play with my dogs. But we absolutely do talk cases at home; it's hard to get around that entirely."

Alan Bick is representing the Modesto Irrigation District in a lawsuit against the California State Water Board over a plan to impose dozen complaints filed by more than 20 petitioners, including the city of San Francisco and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which owns a dam that will be impacted by the State Water Board's proposed minimum flow plan.

That's unusual for me. Usually, I'm adverse to the Department of Justice," he said. He wrote in the complaint that the state's water plan could cost California farmers as much as $2 billion a year. "Farmers, ranchers, but also the city of Modesto, which is mostly disadvantaged populations, will be

"All these issues are complex, and there's both sides to the coin," he said. "To me, the government often overreaches, so I enjoy representing clients against the government."

Encinitas plaintiffs' attorney Livia Borak described Kimberly Bick on a clean water act case and described her as "a great person to have on the other side."

"She definitely knew that area of law and pushed back in areas where I think she should have," Beaudin said, noting they were ultimately able to settle the dispute.

while, that when people she encounters first hear about her area of practice, they often make some interesting assumptions.

"They say, 'Oh, you're an environmental lawyer?' and they immediately think, 'Oh, you're a good guy. You're suing the companies — the bad polluters,'" Bick explained. "So it's very easy to put a white hat, black hat on this scenario. I've always been an environmentalist. I'm a staunch environmentalist, so that's where I come from, but I've also seen that there are multiple sides. There's

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