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OC environmental lawyer strikes out on her own

Bick Law Group, with three attorneys in Newport Beach, serves Fortune 500 companies

By Deirdre Newman

An Orange County environmental lawyer has split from her former firm to form Bick Law Group in Newport Beach.

Kimberly L. Bick, formerly of Umberg Zipser LLP, said she wanted to offer high-caliber legal services at lower rates than bigger law firms charged. She is joined by two attorneys, Gabriel J. Padilla, whom she hired when she was at Umberg Zipser and James M. Sabovich, who was most recently of counsel at PIB Law in Orange County and formerly of Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher LLP.

"Environmental law does not command the big law-tier billing rates, so to be able to provide the same big law level of quality at lower billing rates is really rare and that's the niche I'm trying to fill," she said.

Bick Law Group opened in February and represents clients that are in the Fortune 50 to 500 category, including Lockheed Martin Corp. and Mattel Inc.

Bick, an engineer by training, developed an interest in the legal arena while working on the superfund clean-up sites for McDonnell Douglas. She came up with ideas for the company to comply legally regarding the disposal of hazardous materials, with the end goal of saving the company money by avoiding litigation, but she didn't have any real clout to get them implemented without the help of the company's environmental lawyer, she said.

She soon decided the only way to really make an impact was to get a law degree. She went back to Stanford - where she got her undergraduate degree and a master's in civil engineering - for law school, and later clerked for the chief judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. Soon after she landed her first job at Covington & Burling LLP in Washington, D.C.

She eventually came back to Southern California, where she's from, and worked as senior counsel at Irell & Manella LLP and a partner at Irvine-based Umberg Zipser, which opened earlier this year.

"I thought [Umberg Zipser] was the perfect opportunity because I was looking for an off-ramp out of a big firm," she said.

Dean J. Zipser, one of the founding partners of her former firm, wished Bick the best. "Kim is an accomplished environmental lawyer," he said. "We wish her all the best as she starts on this endeavor."

Padilla, who practices in complex commercial litigation experience with special expertise in environmental matters, speaks highly of Bick as a mentor.

"She's smart, innovative and excellent at strategy," Padilla said. "She takes these cases and gives great guidance and leadership on them."

Sabovich spent 14 year at Gibson Dunn, and was a lead litigator there on environmental and multinational cases, including the recent Chevron case in Ecuador.

Bick praised both Sabovich and Padilla as excellent, experienced lawyers.

"It's more important for me to have a team of people who already know the regulations inside and out and have litigated these cases and know the issues that can come up. That's the best bang for my clients."