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## Detroit law firm Dickinson Wright grows quickly since debut



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Attorneys at Dickinson Wright PLLC in Columbus need only look out their office windows to be reminded of the clients they regularly serve.

The logos of PNC Bank, KeyBank and JPMorgan Chase adorn buildings in view of their offices high above Gay Street. They can see the **Huntington National Bank** tower just blocks away on South High Street.

"Every one of those banks are clients of this firm," said Harlan Robins, member-in-charge of Dickinson Wright's 10-month-old Columbus office. Fifth Third and FirstMerit banks are on that list, too.

To be sure, financial institutions are a key part of the client mix at the fast-growing office, which is focused on real estate and finance law. It has expanded from two attorneys, Robins and Mike Bridges, when it opened last June to nine lawyers now. There are plans to add three to six attorneys by the end of 2013.

"I'm delighted with our progress in Columbus," said Bill Burgess, CEO of the Detroit-based law firm.

Founded in 1878, Dickinson Wright has 360 attorneys practicing in 11 U.S. cities and Toronto, Ontario. The firm boasts 40 practice areas, including two – real estate law and finance – that made Columbus a good place for a new office, Burgess said.

"With our existing real estate and banking client base," he said, "we saw a business expansion opportunity here. Having experienced (Columbus) for nearly a year now, not only do we think we were right but we're wondering why we didn't come here sooner."

## **A snug fit**

Robins and Bridges had worked together for 13 years in the Columbus office of **Baker & Hostetler LLP**, specializing in real estate law and finance. Their areas of expertise and way of looking at things, the two said, have proven to be a good match with how Dickinson Wright operates.

"We have a great story to tell at this firm," Bridges said. "It has young, aggressive management. They want you to work hard and will reward you for it. They give you an opportunity to succeed based on merit."

Dickinson Wright has grown its Columbus office by adding experienced lawyers with connections to Robins and Bridges rather than going to search firms or hiring graduates fresh out of law school.

"Mike and I were impressed with Dickinson Wright's entrepreneurial spirit," Robins said, "and we knew a couple of other folks of like mind. We think the same way and practice law the same way. They viewed it as a tremendous opportunity for their careers to join us and help expand Dickinson's footprint in Columbus."

The firm leased 3,000 square feet in a building at 15 N. Fourth St. when it opened the Columbus office. It moved last October to larger quarters in a Continental Real Estate-owned building at 150 E. Gay St., taking 6,900 square feet of offices and adding 1,000 square feet recently.

The growth in Columbus is a reflection of Dickinson Wright's effort to expand elsewhere, Burgess said. It has added 80 lawyers in the past year by acquiring smaller firms in Nashville, Phoenix and Toronto and adding attorneys at its offices in Michigan and Washington, D.C.

## **Riding economic tide**

Burgess said Dickinson Wright has benefitted from improved business conditions in the Midwest over the past 12 to 18 months, particularly in its home state of Michigan where the U.S. automotive industry is making a comeback.

"Notwithstanding perceptions," he said, "Michigan is actually an attractive place for a lot of business segments."

As is Columbus, Burgess said. He expects his firm to have at least 20 attorneys here in the next five years. The expansion plans include developing a litigation practice and offering other legal services needed by clients.

"We've developed a client-service approach and business mentality," Burgess said, "that supports collaboration among our various offices to best match the needs of our clients."

Jeff Bell covers public policy, utilities, energy and the business of sports for Business First.