



Despite Size, Valley Firms Still Take On Work of Big Guys

PRACTICES: Local lawyers say their location is more efficient for their business.

By [Mark Madler](#)

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From his law office in Encino, **Lee Kanon Alpert** can see Balboa Park and, in the distance, the mountains. His commute does not require taking the freeways.

Kanon started his legal career more than 30 years ago, first in Beverly Hills before moving over to the San Fernando Valley. There have been opportunities to go south of the hills but he hasn't taken them, finding the Valley just fine for his practice.

While large law firms are found downtown and in highly populated commercial districts like Century City, it is the smaller firms like **Alpert, Barr & Grant**, Gaines & Stacey LLP, Genga & Associates and sole practitioners who populate the Valley.

As the bedroom community of the city it became a draw for those wanting something different.

"It was a natural for small business, including law firms, particularly for the environment, the comfort level and the level of ease," **Alpert** said.

It is not just the size of the firms that are different but the characteristics and attitudes of the lawyers themselves. There is less intensity, more camaraderie and close-knit relationships that extend even to judges sitting on the bench.

John Genga, who operates a six-lawyer firm in Sherman Oaks, knows of few firms located downtown that are the size of his. Valley firms, he believes, are probably easier to work with when needing a filing extension or when handling discovery problems.

"I don't know if the bosses are watching the time clock as much as they are in Century City," Genga said.

The Valley has for decades tried to forge a different identity from that of other areas of the city, dating back to the start of the San Fernando Valley Bar Association in the 1920s to lobby to get a courthouse in Van Nuys.

Today the bar association has 1,800 members and about 75 percent of those are sole practitioners and small firms, said Liz Post, the group's executive director.

The beginning

When Dave Fleming started his career more than 50 years ago, all of the practicing attorneys in the Valley could fit in a single room for the bar association's monthly meetings.

Practicing law in those days was akin to practicing in a small town because lawyers handled every type of case, criminal and civil. There was none of the specialization found downtown, Fleming said.

Yet, with all the changes that have taken place over the decades that practice remains.

"My hat's off to those small firms that still take everything that walks through the door," said Fleming, of counsel at mega-law firm Latham & Watkins.

When large corporate headquarters were located in city centers that is where the law firms would go as well. With the recognition of the Valley as a economic base and the 101 Corridor a growing business strip large national firms have taken notice and contributed to the growth of local firms into what by Valley standards are large firms.

Historically there had been firms handling simpler cases for small business matters, family law and personal litigation.

Those practice areas have now been joined by more sophisticated ones, it's just that they are in a smaller form, said Fred Gaines, a name partner in Gaines & Stacey, a firm handling land use and zoning issues.

"Someone who has expertise in a certain area is more important to a client than whether they are with a big firm," Gaines said.

What lawyers find important is efficient use of their time and working in the Valley achieves that because that is also where they live. Genga has an office just a couple of miles from his home, as does **Alpert**.

When he had to drive to an office in Beverly Hills, **Alpert** detested it for the time it wasted for he could have been getting business done.

"Sole practitioners and small firms have always been welcome in the Valley," **Alpert** said. "It has been a good place for us to practice our trade and be close to our families."