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## A Steady Hand

Sixty-five years after its founding, Fullerton Lemann Schaefer & Dominick LLP is still a San Bernardino County staple, having ridden out regional and economic changes.

By Katie Lucia  
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**S**AN BERNARDINO —When Fullerton Lemann Schaefer & Dominick LLP took up the fight of a widow in her 80s in a closely watched eminent domain case several years ago, the firm's partners found themselves at the center of a David-versus-Goliath battle between tradition and development.

The widow, Ellen Disparte, had lived her whole life on a 10-acre ranch that had been in her family for nearly a century. However, her farm fell within the boundaries of property where the Redlands Unified School District planned to build a new high school. When Disparte wouldn't sell, she faced a contentious eminent domain suit — one that eventually settled in her favor.

"To me that case is an example of what our firm is all about," firm partner Michael R. Schaefer said. "It's a single individual where we have done something that's substantially influenced her life."

In the end, the school district agreed to buy the farm, build the campus around it and let her live the rest of her days on the property.

The case turned out in her favor, Schaefer believes, due to his synergy with partner Wilfred C. Lemann. Schaefer, a self-described "hard as nails" litigator, tackled the courtroom battle, while Lemann took the fight to the press.

But even before Disparte's victory put them on the front page, Fullerton Lemann Schaefer & Dominick had been a staple in the region since Bob Fullerton, now deceased, founded the firm in 1948.

Fullerton established a practice with other lawyers who later moved on to other ventures. He eventually hired Lemann fresh out of law school and made him a partner in 1978. The move was unusual, Lemann said, but it was wise. Fullerton needed someone to stick with the firm for the long haul.

Now the eight-lawyer firm handles a variety of civil matters, including real estate, business law and estate planning. Other partners include Craig E. Wilson and Thomas W. Dominick, a certified probate specialist.

Schaefer and Lemann believe the firm has endured through changes in the law, economic shifts and massive development in the region because of the strong connections it's built among its lawyers and with clients.

"We look at all of our clients as individuals and as human beings; they're not cases," Schaefer said. "As a result we have a broad base of extremely loyal people who come back to us over and over again and who recommend us to people they know who need lawyers."

While the attorneys sometimes represent a government agency or an individual, the bulk of their clientele is local businesses, Lemann said. When the economy was robust in 2005 and 2006, the firm saw massive income, he said, because clients had the ability to pay old bills, some dating back more than a decade.



Carrie Rosema / Special to the Daily Journal

From left: Fullerton Lemann Schaefer & Dominick partners Thomas W. Dominick, Wilfrid C. Lemann, Michael R. Schaefer and Craig E. Wilson.

When the market tanked in 2007, he saw that income shift dramatically.

"Fortunately or unfortunately when you have stressful economic times, people need more help than ever," Lemann said. "Now, on the other hand, they have less ability to pay, so, you know, it's been a struggle."

Many have been devoted clients for years, so when they can't immediately pay a bill, the firm is willing to wait for payment, Schaefer said.

The firm has managed to stay afloat, Lemann said, because some matters are nearly unaffected by tough economic times, such as trust litigation.

The past cycle wasn't the first time the firm has ridden economic waves, Schaefer said. Fullerton Lemann took sig-

nificant hits with the closures of prominent local businesses and the Norton Air Force Base, Schaefer said, but managed to survive each time.

The firm has also weathered changes in the San Bernardino legal community.

"We've seen, certainly in the county of San Bernardino, the shrinkage of local law firms," Lemann said. "On the other hand, we've seen the development of law offices of substantial size — national firms."

And as the inland county grew in population, the firm has also seen great expansion of the court system, Lemann said. While the county used to have only one courthouse, based in San Bernardino, it opened several branch courts from Barstow to Rancho Cucamonga over the past several decades.

"I think the era of us knowing every judge in the county and every lawyer in the county is long gone," Lemann said, "so that collegiality, that comradeship is certainly not as strong and not as available for young lawyers as it was for us."

Despite the changes it's endured, Schaefer says the firm remains "old school," maintaining the same attitudes and upholding the same values.

But, Lemann added, the partners have changed with the times in order to counsel their clients effectively.

"Maintaining a [connection] with your partners and with your clients is a challenge today," he said, "and I think we've had some degree of success doing that."

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