

Barnes & Thornburg Head On Firm's Nonmerger Growth Motto

By Tracey Read

Law360 (February 23, 2026, 3:14 PM EST) -- In an age of BigLaw megamergers, Barnes & Thornburg LLP has opted to expand strategically through steady, organic growth and lateral hiring rather than law firm combinations.

On Thursday, the Indianapolis-founded firm announced it had added all 35 public finance lawyers from Ballard Spahr LLP to its government services and finance department in multiple locations around the country, and launched three new offices in Baltimore, Denver and Phoenix.

"This is very, very exciting for us," firm managing partner Andrew Detherage said. "It just aligns so well with the strategy that we have to grow. It couldn't be a better group, it couldn't have better leadership, and I couldn't be more excited about the opportunity."

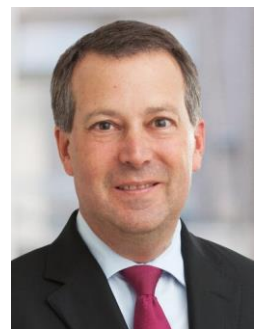
When Detherage joined the firm in 1989, it was based solely in Indiana. Now, it has 26 offices across 20 states and the District of Columbia — all without undergoing a major combination.

Detherage spoke to Law360 Pulse recently about how the new team and offices fit into the firm's master plan. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What was attractive about this particular team?

I joined a statewide law firm. We're now a national law firm, and that was a very strategic decision for us to make that pivot. And we did it differently than probably every other Am Law 100 firm. We did not do it by going out and doing mergers. We did it by being strategic, deciding what markets we wanted to be in, and how we could be successful in those markets. How can we keep adding lawyers that make us better and that can do better on our platform? That's always been our strategy.

So when you look at this group, it fits all of those things. First, we have always had a strong, robust public finance practice. It's a fantastic practice for our law firm. But that practice was very much in the Midwest for us. It started with, here's this opportunity in the practice area that's very important to us, and we can see, without even meeting them, that there's the potential that we'll be a top five practice in the country in public finance. The transition already has been incredibly smooth and gone very well. We've been planning integration since December, and we have big teams of people working on it to make it as successful as possible.



Andrew Detherage

We are now at north of 850 lawyers, but in a very strategic, measured way, and that has been very successful.

Can you tell me more about your nonmerger strategy?

We kind of set out on this course in 2008 with a very deliberate strategy of how to grow. We looked at a merger, [but] didn't think that we could maintain our culture and our governance, and we thought that was important to our long-term success. I believe we've proven that to be true. Our culture and our governance is unique. We're a consensus-oriented organization. We share the traditional partnership values, and we've been able to evolve that even as we've gotten bigger. That collaborative environment really does make a big difference.

We're very lawyer-focused in our leadership, and so we always felt like that was the key to success, and it's borne out. We measure our lateral success rate on if people stay more than five years, and we're at 90%. And we believe that's because we are recruiting strategically. From the very beginning, our view was, math is not a strategy when it comes to growth, it's not a question of what headcount and gross revenue can we get. It's how can we build, get better and serve our clients better. We really believe the environment we have allows our firm to be successful, and we didn't think we could maintain that by doing mergers.

If you went back to 2008, we would have gotten to the 850 lawyers faster. But that wasn't our goal. It's not our goal today to get to any number. Our goal is to get better every day, in every way that we can. That's how we recruit, and for that to be successful, it's built over a long period of time. It's not bringing this group in and seeing the states [they're in]. It's bringing this group in, and having them all finish their career in our firm and create an environment where they want to be here and they're successful and it works well for them.

Can you talk about the launch in Baltimore, Denver and Phoenix, and how you target cities for expansion?

Obviously, we had members of the group in those cities, so that's the easiest starting point. We wanted to bring the entire group — that was very important to us. They're very cohesive. They work extraordinarily well together. They're integrating well already with our team. And so, it was just never a question for us.

We'll look at the opportunities we have in each of those markets. We take a strategic look at each market, and then decide: What do we think we can do well in this market, and then, how are we going to grow in that market in a way that we're successful? It's different in every market.

Look at the history of our firm. We went to Los Angeles in 2012 with eight lawyers. We're now closing in on 80 with very strong practices in the city. A very strong litigation presence, a strong transactional presence. We went to New York and opened in 2020 with a very specific plan focused around corporate investment funds. And we're over 50 lawyers in New York now. It's an office that has made the rest of our firm better. We'll take that same approach, and put together a strategic plan and follow that. For now, we'll see what comes.

Do you have any specific goals in mind as far as adding new attorneys or practice groups in the new offices?

We have no numerical goals whatsoever. Never have. At least as long as I have a say in it, we never will. That's just not a good strategy to me, the strategy of, "We have to have 50 lawyers." Why not 40? Why not 60? And if you have 50, but 20 of them don't fit well and aren't being successful on the platform, having 50 is irrelevant.

We have a lot of strong practices, and we continue to try to build those practices and look for opportunities. If we can do that with lawyers who we think would do better on our platform and make us better, then we will aggressively do that. This [Ballard Spahr team] would be a great example. We've done a lot of recruiting this year with other partners we've added and others we're talking to, and so we'll just continue that approach in Philadelphia and every other market.

I think our goal is just to have this integration be as successful as possible and continue to grow that presence. We have tremendous talent, we have a really broad client base and we're just going to do everything we can to grow that practice as much as we can, again, in a strategic way.

I would use the example that one of our partners just closed a multibillion-dollar healthcare financing transaction, and we had more than 40 different lawyers in multiple different practice areas working on that. We have a very strong healthcare practice that was really central to the ability to do that significant deal. That's what we've built strategically over time and continue to grow. And it's what creates a tremendous opportunity for this team coming in.

--Editing by Daniel King.