

WEDNESDAY, MAY 25, 2016

COVER STORY

## WilmerHale makes move towards Silicon Beach

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**L**OS ANGELES — With the launch of a corporate practice this month and the addition of intellectual property litigators over the past year, the Los Angeles office of Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr LLP has expanded its focus to Silicon Beach and bolstered its core practices.

At the start of May, the firm hired its first corporate partner in the Los Angeles office. Chris Rose came from White & Case LLP, where he worked on mergers and acquisitions and venture capital investments.

WilmerHale also brought on this month an intellectual property litigator, Jason F. Choy from Kirkland & Ellis LLP, as counsel. Life sciences intellectual property litigator James W. Hill joined as partner in July. Hill, who has a medical degree, previously worked at McDermott Will & Emery LLP.

Led by Randall Lee, the former regional director of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission and a former federal prosecutor, the L.A. office of WilmerHale has specialized in securities law, government investigations and intellectual property litigation. The office considered launching the corporate practice there for several years, but was conservative in lateral hires, Lee said.

“The strategy of the office has always been to focus on practice areas that are the core strengths of the firm,” Lee said Thursday. “We have never set out to be all things to all people.”

In Silicon Valley, WilmerHale has a solid practice in buy-side technology and mergers and acquisitions, Rose said on Thursday. The money that will grow Silicon Beach will come from Silicon Valley, Rose said, so the relationships WilmerHale in the Bay Area will help with the



Daily Journal photo

Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr LLP hired Chris Rose, the first corporate partner in its Los Angeles office, as a lateral to focus on mergers and acquisitions and venture capital investments.

introductions they need in Southern California.

Rose, who also practices in Northern California, said large technology and media companies have built offices in Silicon Beach already and in the next five to 10 years, many technology, fashion and digital media startups will continue to pop up.

WilmerHale hopes to serve those startups that branch out in the next years, Rose said.

Other firms that launched offices here see “there’s going to be low-hanging fruit,” Rose said. “But it’s not right this second, it’s not a big area yet.”

Choy said he joined WilmerHale because of its client base and growing West Coast presence. “We have a really good base in our work with companies in Silicon Valley,” he said Friday. “With [the growth of Silicon Beach] comes an opportunity for firms that have that type of track record.”

“Part of our vision is really to focus on the growth of Silicon Beach. We’ve looked very carefully on that

market and our view is that Silicon Beach is here to stay,” Lee said.

Some recruiters, however, said the movement in Silicon Beach is a long way from the action firms see in Silicon Valley, and that other firms might already have the leg up on WilmerHale, which is located downtown.

Firms already closer to the scene in Silicon Beach that cater to digital media and technology companies have the advantage in attracting Silicon Beach business, said recruiter Jason Yuen of Yuen Partners LLC.

“Los Angeles is the only legal market in the nation with the phenomenon of two major, distinct legal centers. If you’re trying to build a startup practice, those attorneys would prefer to be as close to their clients as possible. In this case, it means the Westside,” Yuen said in an email.

“Every firm wants to build a vibrant corporate transactional practice. But it’s hard in L.A. It’s a tough market because it’s a middle market that is overwhelmingly a litigation

town,” Yuen said. “The talent is there but the ones who would lateral are most likely being treated very well at their current firm.”

Sabina Lippman of Lippman Jungers LLC. said many firms have significant venture practices — and WilmerHale has one too — but it’s advantageous to be on the Westside to capture Silicon Beach work.

Larry Watanabe of legal recruiting firm Watanabe Nason LLC, who represented Rose in his move, however, called the move to WilmerHale timely.

“The legal market in Silicon Beach has been extremely active over the past 15 months. A number of firms have opened offices in west Los Angeles to be closer to venture capital and emerging growth companies and firms will continue to do so in the near future,” he said in an email.

“WilmerHale has an acclaimed venture and emerging companies practice, one of the best in the nation. There are many firms in west Los Angeles with far weaker prowess in this area and still trying to break ground,” he added.

Transactional activity within the tech sector so far this year has been sluggish, however, particularly initial public offerings, which are often more lucrative when it comes to legal work.

Over the first quarter, U.S. venture capital investments slowed to levels it hadn’t seen since before 2013, down to about 500 deals closed in the early stage, according to PitchBook, which tracks venture capital activity.

“In terms of the culture of the office, folks made a conscious decision to join us rather than a well-established office in L.A.,” Lee said. “I think that culture has really persisted. It means that everyone in the office really feels invested and they have a stake in its success.”