

## Higgs, Fletcher's New Leadership Comes at a Time of Change



Steven J. Cologne, above, takes over the role of managing partner at Higgs, Fletcher & Mack, which he joined in 1999. Cologne says he wants the firm to continue to attract high-quality legal talent to meet the changing needs of the community. Melissa Jacobs

### LAW: Managing Partner Sees Active Role in Firm, Community

By EMMET PIERCE

After 20 years under the leadership of **John Morrell, Higgs, Fletcher & Mack** has chosen litigator **Steven J. Cologne** to serve as its new managing partner and develop a course for its future.

Cologne said he hopes to bring to the full-service law firm "new ideas, new energy, and a fresh way of looking at the region."

"There are going to be a lot of changes in health care, taxes, and real estate," he said. "Having a new managing partner with new ideas allows us to be relevant and attract top talent to the firm, as well as to renew our commitment to our clients. New leadership with new energy is critical to our continued success."

The firm was founded in 1939. Cologne said he and his partners are proud of the fact that theirs is the oldest operating law firm in San Diego County. Having a deep understanding of the community and the local legal system enables the firm and its attorneys to serve their clients well, he said

#### Local Ownership

**Debra Baker**, managing director of **GrowthPlay**, a professional services group that works with law firms, said changing leadership poses both a challenge and an opportunity for Higgs, Fletcher & Mack.

"John (Morrell) had a great reputation," Baker said. "He brought stability. It will be a challenge as you look at what comes next. Steve (Cologne) also has a fantastic reputation. Change is an opportunity for the entire firm and the partnership to come together and decide as a group 'What is our vision for the future? What can we be thinking about to help our clients?'"

Baker noted that the firm has remained locally owned while many of its San Diego County peers have merged with outside firms.

"One of the things we're seeing in the market is firms the size of Higgs Fletcher are desirable acquisition targets," she said. "At the same time, there are some unique opportunities for firms of that size because they have substance. They are large enough to do interesting things but not so large that they are hindered by the status quo."

#### Community Engagement

Cologne stressed there are no plans for Higgs, Fletcher & Mack to merge with another firm. He said he plans to make networking within the community one of his top priorities.

"I don't think you can expect the managing partner to sit at a desk and interact solely with the firm," he said. "The managing partner has to be someone who engages the community, whether that is serving on a board or out meeting with people and building exciting relationships."

Cologne joined Higgs, Fletcher & Mack in 1999, after serving for 15 years as a shareholder, partner, and associate

with **McInnis, Fitzgerald, Rees & Sharkey**, a litigation firm.

He said he became an attorney, in part, because law was the family business. His father, **Gordon Cologne**, was an attorney and a judge on the California Courts of Appeal. The younger Cologne went to work for the **McInnis Fitzgerald** firm after completing law school.

"I was attracted to the law at a very early age," he said. "I knew I wanted to go to law school."

His area of focus as an attorney has been complex tort and business litigation. He has been retained to defend clients for such issues as employment litigation and breach of contract disputes. He is a member of his law firm's Privacy and Information Security Practice Group and has been serving as the head of the litigation department.

Cologne was chosen annually by his peers to be included in *The Best Lawyers in America* since 2008.

#### Confidence in Cologne

**Andra Donovan**, general counsel for the **San Diego Unified School District**, said she is familiar with Cologne's work.

"Steve has represented this district for many, many years," she said. "He is an excellent lawyer, very talented. He has excellent attorneys who work for him. I am impressed with the extent that he develops them. He grooms them."

**Doug Skidmore**, president of the **Hobie Cat Co.**, which is based in Oceanside, said he has been working with Cologne for about 12 years.

"He has helped us through some tough

spots, as far as litigation is concerned," Skidmore said.

He said Cologne and his colleagues at Higgs, Fletcher & Mack currently manage his company's trademarks. They have helped his business acquire two companies.

Cologne "is highly respected by everyone we have come across who knows him," Skidmore said. "I have a lot of confidence in what Steve can do."

The law firm has 75 attorneys and a total staff of 150 people. Cologne said he plans to make sure the talent level remains high.

"What I am interested in doing is continuing to attract high-quality talent by anticipating the changing needs of the community," he said. "It is very important to be responsive to the client's needs. When clients don't feel their lawyers are responsive or providing a good service, they are not going to be happy."

An important role for attorneys is to help clients avoid litigation whenever possible, Cologne said.

"I like problem solving," he said. "You feel like you are doing a service when you can solve a problem. If it can't be solved, it has to be tried."

"I have thoroughly enjoyed every minute of being a trial lawyer," he continued. "It is very collegial in our community. I can't imagine, looking back, that I'd like to do anything differently."

When he isn't practicing law, Cologne enjoys such activities as traveling, backpacking, and horseback riding.