

Wednesday, September 21, 2011

Weissman Nowack gains litigator

By Meredith Hobbs, Staff Reporter



Reese Willis defends mortgage lenders in claims brought by borrowers.

W. Reese Willis III, who headed McCalla Raymer's Georgia and Alabama litigation practice, joined Weissman Nowack Curry & Wilco last week as of counsel.

Willis said he defends mortgage lenders and loan servicers in loan servicing claims brought by borrowers, adding that he also prosecutes mortgage fraud cases for lenders and servicers and handles creditors' rights and commercial litigation. He's done work for Bank of America, BB&T, JPMorgan Chase & Co., Flagstar Bank and OneWest Bank, which bought IndyMac Federal Bank from the FDIC in 2009.

Willis had practiced at McCalla Raymer since 2005, becoming the managing partner of the 80-lawyer firm's Georgia and Alabama litigation practice at the beginning of 2010. Kent E. Altom is now heading the 16-lawyer group.

Willis said he hopes for "synergies" between his practice and the real estate work that Weissman Nowack does. "It was an opportunity to start a banking defense practice at WNCW," he said. "I'm glad for the new opportunity."

The head of Weissman Nowack's litigation practice, Leigh M. Wilco, said the firm does title insurance defense work but that Willis' experience directly defending banks and lenders in mortgage litigation is a new area.

While Weissman Nowack handles real estate closings and community association work, about half of the firm's 50 lawyers are litigators, said Wilco.

"People don't realize that," he said. "They think of us as a closing firm."

Wilco said the firm handles a variety of real estate litigation, representing brokers, agents and appraisers, as well as real estate-related disputes over, for instance, land use and the purchase and sale of commercial properties. He said it also handles more general litigation such as insurance coverage, insurance defense and plaintiff's personal injury work.

"We look for people with the same approach to the practice of law and with practices that complement our practices, so that the whole is greater than the individual," said Wilco.

Weissman Nowack added another real estate lawyer, Bradley A. Hutchins, as of counsel in July from Proctor Hutchins Porterfield and brought in John H. Horne and Marlo Orlin Leach in April as partners from the now-defunct firm Yoss.

Last month the firm opened a Miami office, its first outside of Georgia, with two lawyers from Miami firm Hyman Spector & Mars. Ricardo A. Gomez, who joined as of counsel, managed the foreclosure practice at Hyman Spector.

McCalla Raymer, which, according to managing partner Marty M. Stone, has the largest foreclosure practice in Georgia, also has been expanding its litigation practice. Stone said that almost half of the firm's 80 lawyers are litigators, and it has added four or five since April.

McCalla Raymer represents lenders and servicers in residential mortgage disputes, Stone said, primarily over loan servicing and also handles title litigation. "We wish Reese the best of luck," he said.

Stone said his firm is seeing fewer foreclosures than at this time last year. "I've never seen what we experienced in the past year," he said, adding that McCalla Raymer handled a record number of foreclosures in the first quarter of 2010.



"We are not going to see in the foreseeable future the number we saw in, say, 1Q of 2010," Stone said, predicting that the current level of foreclosure activity in Georgia is likely "the new normal for at least the next 18 months or so."

Stone said lenders nationally have pulled back on foreclosures in reaction to robo-signings and the settlement that a number of big servicers made with federal regulators in April, promising more due diligence.

Even so, Georgia ranked fourth in the nation for foreclosures in August with 11,743 filings, according to RealtyTrac.

That was up 2 percent over July but down 28 percent from filings in August 2010. Nevada, California and Arizona had the most foreclosure filings in August.