

GREATER BINGHAMTON

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## Coughlin & Gerhart targets growth from natural-gas industry

BY TRACI DELORE

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BINGHAMTON — The natural-gas drilling boom may not have hit New York just yet, but legal firm Coughlin & Gerhart, L.L.P. is not waiting to take the opportunity to grow the firm.

The company opened a branch office in Montrose, Pa. Sept. 1, partly to gain business from the growing natural-gas boom taking place in Pennsylvania.

The rapid growth in commercial activity, primarily from the natural-gas industry centered on the Marcellus Shale formation, has created demand in the market for additional legal resources, says Mark Gorgos, managing partner of Coughlin & Gerhart.

In particular, growing demand for expertise in gas leasing, estates, trusts, tax planning, environmental law, litigation, and commercial and labor law is likely more than existing, smaller law firms in that area can meet, he says.

"We don't intend to take work off the desks of attorneys there," he says, but there is more than enough demand for the expertise Coughlin & Gerhart offers to justify having an office there.

"The gas leases are complex documents that are binding for years and years," Gorgos says. Landowners should have legal advice so they are aware of what they are signing, he adds.

And that's just the start of things. A good lease for a successful well can generate a significant revenue stream for landowners, who should then think about tax and estate

planning to manage their newfound wealth.

"It's a fascinating development," Gorgos says. "There's certainly huge economic-development potential there."

Opening the office at 181 Maple St. in Montrose also brings the company full circle, Gorgos says. The firm had an office in Montrose about 25 years ago, but the office was too busy for the staff of one attorney to keep it going, he says.

The company also heard from area clients, who said a Pennsylvania office would be more convenient than parties traveling back and forth between Binghamton and Pennsylvania.

Coughlin & Gerhart is leasing about 500 square feet of space that includes a reception area and office, along with access to a conference room, Gorgos says. He declined to name the company from which his firm is leasing the space.

Susan English, a partner in Coughlin & Gerhart, heads up the new office, which is open Tuesday through Friday. English is a Montrose-area native and lives in nearby Silver Lake Township with her family.

"She's already an existing community member," Gorgos says. Six other lawyers from the firm help out at the Montrose office. Two of them will work nearly full-time in Pennsylvania, while the other four will work there, as their services are required.



English

Gorgos has yet to calculate projections for the office in terms of revenue or client growth.

"We're going to be very patient with the growth plan there," he says.

As an example of the kind of oil and gas litigation work it does, Coughlin & Gerhart had a note on its website, dated Aug. 23, highlighting a case it is pursuing on behalf of local landowners.

Coughlin & Gerhart said it recently filed a lawsuit in federal court against energy companies, Enervest Ltd. and Belden & Blake Corporation. In 1999 and 2000, the companies entered into oil and gas leases with landowners (known collectively as the "Northern Broome Association") for \$3 an acre per year, according to the law firm. "While these 10 year leases have since expired, the companies refuse to release the landowners from these leases based upon a 'force majeure' argument claiming that they cannot conduct Marcellus shale drilling. Coughlin & Gerhart is seeking a judgment on behalf of the landowners declaring that these leases have terminated by the contract terms which would allow the landowners, if they wish to do so, the ability to lease their land to other gas companies at current fair market value lease rates," the firm's note said.

Headquartered at 19 Chenango St. in Binghamton, Coughlin & Gerhart ([www.cglawoffices.com](http://www.cglawoffices.com)) has served the Southern Tier since the 1890s. The firm has more than 40 attorneys on staff. □

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