

Deal's Former Lawyer Joins Robbins Firm

Ryan Teague, formerly the governor's top lawyer, has joined litigation and regulatory **Robbins Ross Alloy Belinfante Littlefield** as a partner.

Teague, 37, was Gov. Nathan Deal's executive counsel before resigning in December to focus on his family's business, Baldwin Paving, in Marietta. At his new firm he rejoins an old friend, Josh Belinfante, who was Gov. Sonny Perdue's executive counsel before leaving in 2009 to become a partner at Robbins Ross.

"We're excited to have somebody who's been on the forefront of Georgia's most critical litigation over the last six years," Belinfante said.

The two met as classmates at the University of Georgia School of Law, graduating in 2003—then went on to clerk for the same judge, 11th Circuit of Appeals Judge J.L. Edmonson.

Teague joined McKenna Long & Aldridge, now part of Dentons, as a new associate in 2004, where he found a mentor in Randy Evans, a politically connected Republican lawyer who represents Deal.

After a brief stint as general counsel of Freedom's Watch, a conservative, now-defunct lobbying group in Washington, he returned to Atlanta in 2009 to become Perdue's deputy executive counsel, then went to work for Deal.

"I worked very closely with the governor and Chris Riley," Teague said. Riley, Deal's chief of staff, has worked for him for about 25 years. "I was very proud to work with Chris. He was a fantastic leader of the executive branch for Governor Deal in the time I was there."

"I was in there longer than most," Teague said. "It was time to pass the torch." He added that his successor, David Warner, is a close friend. The governor named Warner, a longtime aide, as his executive counsel in January.

Belinfante said Teague's government experience will be useful, since Robbins Ross does a lot of litigation for the state and handles cases involving government, such as zoning and licensing issues.

Teague also will do appellate advocacy at the firm, an area that Belinfante said has been busy.

"Lawyers with his level of government experience and array of political and business contacts are in high demand," said the firm's founder, Richard Robbins.

Teague, the firm's 17th lawyer, joins other Republican lawyers with government experience: Vincent Russo, who was general counsel to Georgia Secretaries of State Brian Kemp and Karen Handel and then assistant securities commissioner, and Kimberly Anderson, who was Attorney General Jeff Sessions' legislative

counsel on the Senate Judiciary Committee.

During his tenure as the governor's top lawyer, Teague worked on many high-profile initiatives, including Deal's multiyear effort to reform the state's criminal justice system in tandem with the Legislature. "Governor Deal should be given credit for his foresight on that," Teague said. "I think it's the most extensive criminal justice reform effort by any state in the country."

He worked on health care litigation, including the state's response to the federal mandates for Obamacare, such as whether Georgia would set up an insurance exchange. The state opted out.

Teague led the governor's office in working with the city and state in getting the new Falcons stadium, known as the Mercedes-Benz Stadium, financed and built. He worked with the Georgia Ports Authority in ongoing South Carolina litigation over deepening the Port of Savannah and helped renegotiate a joint venture agreement with South Carolina for the proposed port in Jasper, South Carolina.

Teague also led the governor's legal response to the tri-state water wars: the long-running dispute between Georgia, Florida and Alabama over water usage. He is still involved in the matter as a special assistant attorney general representing Georgia in the dispute with Florida.

Georgia won a favorable ruling in February from a special master, Maine lawyer Ralph Lancaster, in a suit brought by Florida claiming that Georgia's overconsumption of water is damaging the ecology and economy of the Apalachicola Bay. The special master's decision is now under review by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Teague said he spent most of last fall in Maine, while he was still Deal's top lawyer, working with the state attorney general's office and a platoon of lawyers from Kirkland & Ellis engaged by the governor and attorney general to prepare for the special master proceeding.

"It went to trial relatively quickly for a case of that magnitude. It was a grueling process," Teague said, adding that while technically an evidentiary hearing, it was akin to a federal bench trial.

Teague said he's glad he had the big firm experience earlier and still considers Evans at Dentons a mentor but wanted to join a smaller firm because of his work for Baldwin Paving.

"I felt that this was the ideal place to be for the type of day-to-day practice that I'll be engaged in," he said. "We want to continue to grow this firm and be very competitive in the Atlanta marketplace, but not to be one of the large, large corporate firms. It's a different style of practicing law."

The opportunity to take on appellate work was also a draw, he added.

Teague said he will be lawyering, not lobbying, at Robbins Ross. "I'm a lawyer, and that's where my interest lies," he said. "I'm very open to being actively engaged in strategically advising clients on how to deal with government, but my focus is not on actively lobbying the Legislature on issues."

Teague is on the board of the Bobby Jones Golf Course Foundation, which is leading the redevelopment of the historic public golf course at Memorial Park in Buckhead. The foundation entered into a 50-year lease with the Georgia Building Authority in November after the state bought the course from the city with the plan to transform it from an 18-hole course to a nine-hole course and add a driving range and a "wee links" for children.

He's also serving on the board of the Metro Atlanta YMCA and the UGA Board of Visitors.