



The Old Municipal Building in downtown Dallas, future home of the UNT Dallas College of Law. Photo courtesy of UNT System.

Practice Ready

Dallas' New Public Law School Moves Forward

BY JUDY L. MARCHMAN

Plans are proceeding apace for the new law school at the University of North Texas at Dallas. Yes, that's right. Texas' 10th law school is currently under development, even in the middle of what would seem to be an unfavorable climate for doing so.

A March 29 report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics examining the job outlook for the legal profession predicted a growth of 10 percent in the number of practicing lawyers in the country between 2010 and 2020 and cautioned that the number of law school graduates — 44,000 in 2010, according to American Bar Association statistics — would continue to outpace the number of available jobs. But officials at the University of North Texas (UNT) System are confident that they are putting the tools in place for the UNT Dallas College of Law to succeed.

The creation of a public law school in North Texas was approved by the Texas Legislature in 2009 with \$5 million of the state's 2010–11 budget earmarked for the proposed school. The law school will be located in downtown Dallas and will be housed

initially at 1901 Main St., which currently houses the UNT System offices and the Universities Center at Dallas, a multi-institutional teaching center that offers upper-level courses from three universities. The UNT System recently launched a \$24 million renovation to the building to make room for the law school.

"We are on target to open in August 2014," said Rosemary Haggett, the UNT System vice chancellor for academic affairs and student success. Haggett is overseeing the launch of the law school.

The school's eventual home will be Dallas' Old Municipal Building, a historic Beaux Arts-style structure dating to 1914. As the city's former city hall and jail, it holds the distinction of being the location where Jack Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald. Haggett said that once needed funding is obtained from the state, work on converting the building into the new law school would commence, with an estimated opening date of 2017.

With housing plans under way, university officials have also brought the school's leadership on board, and they chose two prominent figures in the legal community.

“We are so excited to have our leadership identified and joining us in about a year from now. It’s a big step for us,” Hagggett said.

In January, UNT System Chancellor Lee F. Jackson announced that Senior U.S. District Judge Royal Furgeson, Jr. would become founding dean of UNT Dallas College of Law. Furgeson is being joined by Michael H. Schwartz, recently named the associate dean for academic affairs. Schwartz, a law professor at Washburn University School of Law in Topeka, Kan., is a recognized leader in the field of educating lawyers and has written extensively on the topic. Both will assume their duties next spring.

Practical Curriculum

The law school’s primary calling card lies in it being the only public law school in the region and thus providing a more cost-effective alternative for prospective law students. The other area law schools — Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law in Dallas and Texas Wesleyan School of Law in Fort Worth — are private institutions.

“As a public school, the tuition will be less than private law schools, so students hopefully won’t have to carry as much debt and can pursue many different legal career paths that otherwise might not be open to them,” said Hagggett, who added that the school would aim for an initial class of 95 to 100 students.

Furgeson is limiting his work with the law school until he formally resigns his judgeship, but said his primary role as founding dean will be to connect the law school to the profession through outreach to the legal community, while Schwartz will primarily handle the teaching and academic requirements, although they will collaborate on their duties as well. Both are excited to have the opportunity to help create a law school from scratch. They also

share a strong belief that law students must learn practice readiness. That belief will greatly inform the school’s curriculum. “We want our students to be distinct in their practice readiness,” said Schwartz, “and we want to be distinct in implementing modern standards in teaching and education techniques.”

The curriculum is still very much in the idea phase, but Schwartz has a fairly thorough vision in mind already.

“We want the curriculum to be relevant to what students need to know,” he said. Key among his ideas are courses focusing on negotiations, legal writing requirements across the curriculum, externships, law practice management, and an emphasis from the very first day on ethics and professionalism

— and not only for the students but for the school itself. “Our internal operations must communicate an expectation of professionalism, but the school should walk the walk. We must hold ourselves accountable, as well,” Schwartz said.

With Furgeson and Schwartz on board, Hagggett said the school will look to recruit the remaining leadership including a director of admissions and an associate dean of the Law Library. Once Furgeson and Schwartz join the school full time, the school will move into a formal faculty search and curriculum development with the goal to start accepting student applications by the fall of 2013. As for accreditation, the school must be in operation for one year before it can apply to the American Bar Association.

“Because we’re building a law school from the ground up, we have the opportunity to provide different approaches,” said Hagggett. “Through the curriculum, we can provide students with the practice-ready skills they need to make them more employable and able to serve many different populations.”

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is managing editor of the *Texas Bar Journal*.



Judge Royal Furgeson



Michael H. Schwartz



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