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COVER STORY

## Ex-governor rejoins aides to build consultancy

By America Hernandez  
Daily Journal Staff Writer

Former Gov. Pete Wilson has left Morgan Lewis Consulting to start Wilson Walsh George Ross LLC, a new consultancy with his former deputy chief of staff and press secretary Sean T. Walsh and former legal affairs deputy Eric M. George, who is a name partner at business litigation boutique Browne George Ross LLP.

The 25-attorney law firm, which added a three-attorney New York office in January, now seeks to expand its services to offer clients behind-the-scenes help navigating regulatory compliance at the federal, state and local levels in any deal involving “policy, politics, strong arming, massaging, and everything in between,” Walsh said.

The firm and consulting group are stand-alone entities, which will work in tandem to resolve issues before a lawsuit materializes, or initiate legal action when necessary.

“More and more firms, larger ones in part, have decided they can use a consulting group to deal with regulators and try to avoid the cost of protracted and complex litigation,” the former governor said.

“Now I get to work very closely with trusted colleagues in a smaller firm, which makes the kind of intimate, frequent consultation with one another much more easily accomplished,” he added.

Wilson said he looked forward to the nimble aspect of a small group, where he won’t have to wait days or weeks for conflict checks to clear and risk losing out on a client needing immediate help.

Wilson and Walsh joined Bingham McCutchen’s consulting group in 2007, which was absorbed into Morgan Lewis Consulting in 2014.

Post-merger, Eric M. George reached out to his former boss about



Alex Drecun / Special to the Daily Journal

Left to right, Eric George, Pete Wilson, Peter Ross and Sean Walsh of Wilson Walsh George Ross LLC

pulling the old team together to build a small consulting group focused on California. After six months of talks, George said, Walsh and Wilson agreed.

“It’s exhilarating,” George said of the new venture. “The governor and Sean are superb in every way, as advisers, partners, business generators, and they have already been able to apply their creative ideas to some of the firm’s existing matters.”

The firm is currently representing the Mission Bay Alliance in litigation opposing the new location of a \$1 billion planned sports arena for the Golden State Warriors basketball team in San Francisco.

Wilson and Walsh have advised George on the out-of-court aspects involved in getting government entities to understand objectors’ concerns about the project.

“Our goal is to view the 360-degree solution to a problem: media strategy, law, public affairs,” Walsh said. “If you never see our fingerprints, that’s the best kind of work we do.”

Prior to working as Wilson’s deputy chief of staff from 1993 to 1998, Walsh served as a press officer under President Ronald Reagan and then as assistant press secretary to President George H.W. Bush.

He was a senior consultant and principal at Morgan Lewis Consulting, which he said is willing to share and refer work to his new consulting group.

Though the Browne George Ross firm does have two white collar criminal defense lawyers on staff, the consulting group will not deal with situations in which criminal charges have been filed, the team said.

Its focus will instead be on businesses embarking on projects in California, where government relations are paramount in easing the path for permit approvals, determining what new statutes apply or don’t, and liaising with regulators who are drafting industry rules or considering enforcement actions.

Brett H. Bailey, general counsel of Big West Oil LLC, said Wilson’s

political intelligence came in handy when what he thought of as a run-of-the-mill refinery expansion resulted in refused construction permits and a slew of surprise investigations.

“Sean and Governor Wilson jumped right in on it and helped us understand what was going on politically behind the scenes, why it was so controversial, and prepped us before meetings with officials,” Bailey said. “It’s funny how once you figure out exactly who is opposing you and why, how much easier it is to address those concerns.”

Wilson noted that California regulations are often misused for reasons other than their intended purpose.

“It is not unfair or inaccurate to describe tactics that have been employed as CEQA abuse to the point of extortion,” Wilson said, referring to the California Environmental Quality Act.

“If we come to the conclusion that a regulation is contrary to existing law or unconstitutional, then we will challenge it, because more often than not the agency has construed its role as being broader and having more authority than it is,” he said.

Robert D. McArver, a former vice president for chemical manufacturer Celanese Corp., said Wilson and Walsh were invaluable in helping shape the regulatory framework around vinyl acetate monomer, an industrial polymer that the state Environmental Protection Agency wanted to label a hazardous chemical requiring public disclosure.

“Sean and the governor were extremely helpful in getting our message to the right people in Gov. Schwarzenegger’s office and within CalEPA to make sure our issues were understood as the regulations evolved,” McArver said.

Wilson will work out of Browne George Ross LLP’s Los Angeles office, while Walsh is in San Francisco.