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Hunter Bates, Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld



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Don Pongrace, center, is stepping down from his role leading the public law and policy practice at Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, which has recently grown to become D.C.'s largest lobbying firm. Bipartisan pair Hunter Bates, left, and Brian Pomper will work together to take his place.

Changing of the guard at DC's top lobby firm

Bipartisan duo tapped to lead public law and policy team at Washington's highest-earning lobbying operation

By Megan R. Wilson

• Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, the largest lobby shop in Washington, is undergoing a change in leadership.

Don Pongrace will be stepping down as the head of the firm's public law and policy practice, which houses the firm's lobbyists, and handing the reins to a bipartisan duo that previously ran their own boutique firms: Brian Pomper, who worked for former Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.), and Hunter Bates, the former top aide to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.).

“We're living in a world where bipartisanship is becoming increasingly important and remarkably less present. Having co-leaders in the practice group internally is a very strong signal that this is what the firm is about,” said Pongrace, who has been at the helm of Akin's lobbying practice since 2012.

While the firm will be

announcing the change on Tuesday, the transition will be happening throughout the year, Pongrace said.

Akin Gump's annual lobbying revenue has increased 15 percent since 2012, coming in at around \$35.9 million last year. During the same period, the policy shop went from 50 lawyers and lobbyists to roughly 85 and became the top-earning firm, by lobbying revenue, in all of Washington.

The firm has also added an emerging technologies practice, a healthcare practice and a Cuba-focused policy practice.

In the midst of all the growth, the leaders of Akin Gump say they are looking to cultivate more of a boutique mindset for the firm, in line with broader trends in the industry.

“When I look at what we want to do, one of those things is to have a large-firm platform with a small-firm culture,” Bates

said. “I think the [public law and policy] shop here already has a lot of feel of a small firm, where you have constant communication, you have buy-in from everyone, where people are fully integrated and invested in the outcomes.”

In November, Bates left Republic Consulting, his four-person firm that he founded in 2013 with former Rep. Geoff Davis (R-Ky.), to join Akin Gump. Prior to that, he ran a solo firm, Bates Capitol Group, which was bought by C2 Group.

“One of the things we want to do is look for every way possible to continue to instill a small-firm culture within a large-firm platform,” Bates continued.

Pomper also knows what it's like to run a small firm. He came to Akin Gump seven years ago after the firm acquired his six-person shop, Parven Pomper Strategies.

“The way I operated in my little six-person firm,” he said, “that's not any different from how we operate today, except that I have a giant army behind me of other lobbyists and lawyers and subject experts that I never had before.”

He and Pongrace recalled a moment shortly after Pomper

had joined the firm where a lawmaker in the House, who had been a proponent of a specific client's issue, had suggested putting together an amendment about it.

Pomper, accustomed to the Senate, wasn't sure how to go about making sure the votes would be there. But after talking to Pongrace and mobilizing dozens of lobbyists, the amendment ended up receiving 330 votes in the House.

“You told me early on, ‘Look, we're going to win this,’” Pomper said to Pongrace. “You said that because you knew what we could bring to bear on this issue, which is touching 435 offices in a matter of weeks. And coming from my small firm, I couldn't even contemplate pushing that kind of a boulder up a hill, but you knew it.”

Akin Gump boasts talent from both chambers on Capitol Hill, in addition to former administration officials and lobbyists skilled in running campaigns and fundraising operations.

While the Trump administration is shaking up Washington, Pomper and Bates said the building blocks of advocacy have not changed.

“There's a lot of talk about

how things changed in terms of how you get your message out, and I think the core of advocacy in Washington is still the same. It's built on relationships and expertise and integrity,” Bates said. “At the end of the day, no matter what the technology is or who is in power, those core elements are the same and will continue to be the same.”

Pomper added: “The word I would have used is trust. That's all it is.”

“The point is, and this is why I say ‘trust,’ is because over time, people know that I am not going to sell them down the river. I'm going to tell them what's what, and I'm going to help them do their job in a way that will help them,” he said.

Pongrace often harkens to one of the firm's namesakes, Robert Strauss, who was a prominent Democratic figure but advised Republicans and served as an ambassador during the George H.W. Bush administration.

In choosing Bates and Pomper for this role, Pongrace says, the firm is living up to its heritage.

“This is Bob Strauss's firm. ... There is the institutional requirement and due burden of that, carrying that legacy of someone who was well known for being able to advise presidents from both sides of the aisle and call anyone at any time with a good idea or to help someone with a good idea,” he said.

“My view was that it was a perfectly appropriate time to take two of the best examples of bipartisanship within our group and demonstrate internally and externally that that is where the firm has been and is committed to going.”