

# IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT



## Thornton Williams Leading the Way in Transportation Law

BY DAVE FIORE

Tallahassee attorney Thornton Williams has built a flourishing private practice by keeping his clients on the road to success.

One of Florida's most respected and influential transportation lawyers, his clients include advertising giants Clear Channel Communications and Viacom, and TransCore, the company behind the SunPass toll-collection system.

Williams, called a "pioneer" in transportation law in the April 2006 cover story of *Florida Transportation Monthly* magazine, is proud that these and other major companies have continued to rely on his firm to represent them over the years, particularly since Williams Wilson and Sexton P.A., still is a relatively small firm.

"I believe it is significant that we can

attract institutional clients when conventional wisdom says they would not seriously consider a firm of our size," said Williams, who cut his teeth on transportation law as general counsel at the Florida Department of Transportation from 1990 to 1996. "With our technical knowledge and approach to issues, we have found that if the clients meet with us, they are receptive to



our strategic approach to their issues, and they ultimately hire us.”

Williams started the firm in 1998 in Tallahassee with Paul Sexton, a former administrative law supervisor at FDOT, and one full-time support person. By the third year, they had opened a Fort Lauderdale office and convinced Mel Wilson, a former FDOT district general counsel and 1984 College of Law graduate, to join the firm. Now in their ninth year, the firm still is in growth mode. At the beginning of the year, the firm had five lawyers. Today, it employs seven lawyers and is poised to make additional hires.

Knowledge and experience in the field, says Williams, a 1981 College of Law graduate, are the keys to the firm’s success.

“Because most of our lawyers held significant responsibilities in government in their areas of expertise over a number of years, we understand the governmental process,” Williams said. “We know the policies that drive the thinking in government agencies because, in some cases, we developed them.”

The technical training of the firm’s lawyers gives them the ability to develop winning strategies fast.

“Even though we are capable of litigating because we understand the basis of the disputes, we often are able to persuade transportation agencies to agree to acceptable dispositions of the matter without litigation,” Williams said. “They agree because we give them factual data or legal history based upon our experience to support a result that is in everyone’s best interest.”

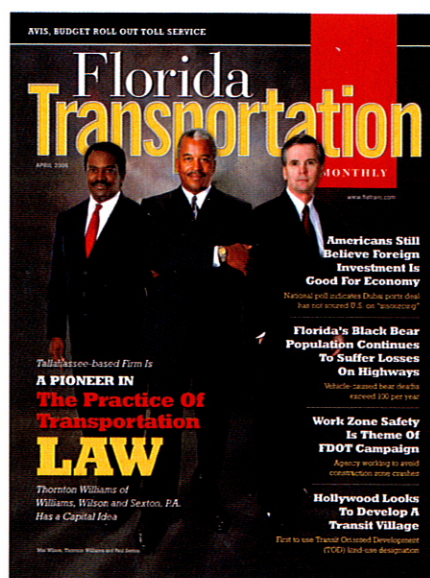
While his tenure at FDOT laid the groundwork for future success in private practice, Williams admits that his inexperience in transportation law made those early days at the agency interesting.

“I suddenly was in charge of 27 lawyers and 60 people and was responsible for the coordination of policy for approximately another 75 lawyers out in the field,” Williams said. “What I discovered is that transportation law is a very comprehensive endeavor. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that within the Florida Department of Transportation’s General Counsel’s Office, there were law-

yers in administrative law, property damage, collections, tort law, construction litigation, eminent domain, employment law — almost every discipline.”

To meet the needs of a transportation law practice, the firm has systematically hired lawyers with expertise in the legal areas affecting transportation interests.

Williams began his legal career as a felony prosecutor and within two years, he was one of five attorneys working for Gov. Bob Graham. He stepped from the



governor’s office into the Administrative Hearings Section of the then-Florida Department of Business Regulation.

“The timing was fortunate for me at DBR, because it was at the height of the time-share melt down,” Williams said. “Also, I got involved in some phenomenally large bankruptcies—tens of millions of dollars—including the largest bankruptcy in the history of the state of Florida at that time, which was over \$1 billion. It was a great foundation for me. This experience proved invaluable in handling some of the complex matters at FDOT.”

Williams’ next break came when then-secretary of the Department Business Regulation Steve McNamara was approached by former FDOT Secretary Ben Watts, who was new to the job, about an “internal logistical problem” at his agency.

“I was told that they needed some fresh

thinking at FDOT,” Williams said. “They had great lawyers who were doing excellent work, but there was a perception that the legal office needed to go in a different direction. He wanted to bring in people who could think outside the conventional FDOT box. Steve told him (Watts) about me, and we hit it off as soon as we met.”

Asked what he finds most rewarding about his success, Williams, who also serves as the county attorney for Gadsden County and sits on the board of the Tallahassee Urban League and is vice chair of the Tallahassee Downtown Improvement Authority, says it has little to do with the practice of law.

“It’s not the work,” he said. “What I find most rewarding is that my kids are good kids, and they want to do something with their lives as they grow older. The second most significant thing is that I have had the opportunity to help people less fortunate. My dad taught me that you should work to do things that you care about and you should care about people who are not as lucky. As exciting as it is to have this opportunity, it is not as rewarding to me if I am not able to help others in the community.”

The legacy of Williams and his wife, Harriet (Williams) Williams, who graduated from the law school in 1988, already is apparent in their three daughters. Ashley is a student at Georgetown University, Brittany is vice president of her freshman class in high school, and Chelsea is vice president of her middle-school class.

In turn, Williams says that one of the people who influenced his life was Dean Don Weidner. Williams served as the dean’s research assistant for a period of time in law school.

“He helped me understand what it takes to be successful,” Williams said. “I was a young kid who didn’t know that I didn’t know, and he helped me understand that there are a lot of opportunities in the world and you have to work hard to give yourself a chance—even though there is no guarantee. For that I am very appreciative.” ✱