

Longtime Sterne Kessler Head Reflects On Leadership

By Emma Cueto

Law360 (January 16, 2026, 3:22 PM EST) -- After nearly two decades leading intellectual property boutique Sterne Kessler Goldstein & Fox PLLC, the firm's outgoing managing director reflects on succession planning, returning to his practice and navigating challenges from Y2K to COVID-19 during his time in leadership.

Michael B. Ray, who became managing director of the firm in 2007, stepped back from the role this month in favor of trial lawyer and executive committee member Byron L. Pickard. He will remain with the firm as a partner and chair.

"Byron is a fantastic lawyer; he's a great leader; and he's enthusiastic and bringing new energy. And I'm excited to step back," Ray said. "I think I've made my mark on the firm, and it really is time for some new energy and ideas."

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

How does it feel to have stepped down as managing director and be starting a new chapter?

It feels good and a little scary. I was elected managing partner at the end of 2006, and it became effective in 2007, so it's been a long time. And I was actually on the executive committee for about seven years before that, so this would be the first time in a long time that I'm not on the executive committee or managing director of the firm.

I understand you are staying on as chair. What does that role consist of, and what will it look like for you?

It's a newly created position. The managing director position is a full-time position here at the firm; at least, it was for me. My practice got much, much smaller, and I was primarily just focused on the firm. Our goal going forward is to allow the managing director to maintain a larger practice.

In Byron's case, for example, he's a very successful trial lawyer, and we'd like him to maintain and even grow his practice. In order to do that, we had to take the responsibilities I was handling and divide them up a bit. It's still a work in progress, but we're trying to give more responsibilities to our very capable COO [Robert K. Burger]; some responsibilities to other executive committee members, some to the chair positions. The goal is to allow the managing director, in this case Byron, to maintain his practice.



Michael B. Ray

For the chair, as currently envisioned, we have a list of things that include focusing on clients and client feedback; considering some new practice areas; some strategic things like looking at our strategic plan and areas for strategic growth; and there are some internal things I was working on as managing director that didn't get finished.

So it's a variety of things, but it's really what the firm needs at the time. We're going to keep the position flexible.

Looking back at your time at the firm, are there things that stand out to you as highlights?

Some of the significant things happened before I was managing director, but as an executive committee member I was still very involved. Let's go back to Y2K and what a big deal that was for law firms. I was the chair of our IT committee at the time and part of the preparation work we did for Y2K, which fortunately turned out to be a nonevent for the firm. There was also the dot-com bubble burst in 2000 or 2001, and because we represent so many tech companies, Silicon Valley companies, that absolutely affected our practice. We had to diversify and look to different types of companies, especially for our electronics group. That was pretty significant and I think we navigated that really well.

In about 2006, we formalized our litigation practice as a separate practice group at the firm. Previously, litigation was all done through our industry groups, but in 2006 we started our litigation group, which today is called our trial and appeal group, with the goal of making litigation about half the revenue of the firm. And we did that successfully. To this day, it's about half the revenue for the firm, and we think that's the perfect balance for an IP firm.

Before COVID-19, in the years before that, we were seeing a trend where our employees and certainly our attorneys wanted to work from home. It was just starting to happen naturally, so we spent a lot of time developing procedures and guidelines about how people could work remotely — and then COVID happened. And we were very well-prepared for that. I think we were one of the first law firms in D.C. to send everyone home, and we sent everyone home with their computer and said, "Be prepared to work from home until further notice." It worked pretty seamlessly for us. I'm proud of the way we managed through that.

I remember starting on day 1 of remote work, Bob Burger, the COO, and I every night — and we did this for months — would send out a detailed email to the firm about where we were and how we were doing. We wanted to give people a sense that it was going to be OK and to be able to stay connected to the firm. I think the way we handled COVID, in hindsight, turned out really well. We did all the right stuff to prepare, and we handled it well. And that transitioned into today where we have a well-oiled machine in terms of hybrid work.

During my time as managing partner, we signed two new leases, including our current space in D.C. We designed a space set up for the law firm of the future, and I think it's worked well. We do 100% hoteling — and it worked so well one of our clients said we should write a white paper. We do have assigned offices for people who commit to at least three days a week, and some people have done that. But most people hotel. I come into the office as much as anybody, but I still hotel.

And if you'd asked me 20 years ago if we'd ever be able to have lawyers, partners without an assigned office I would have said, "No, it would never work," and we've made it work, and it works well. We don't have an office mandate, yet we have good office attendance. Attorneys visit from other firms and say how vibrant our offices are. So I'm proud of what we've been able to accomplish culturally without an

office mandate.

And finally, I was the first non-founder managing director of the firm. So we were able to transition the firm from founding generation to second generation, and now with Byron to third generation. And that's a big deal. Some firms don't make it past founding generation. It's still a work in progress, but it's gone smoothly so far, to transfer from second generation leadership to a third generation leadership, which I'm very proud of. I'm very bullish on the firm right now.

And speaking of the transition, what have you learned from the process of finding a successor and transitioning out of the managing director role?

I would say first these transitions are very important. A law firm culture is a delicate thing. Law firms are unique in that your most valuable resources get on the elevator every night and leave. And now with hybrid work and virtual work, it's really easy for lawyers and partners, really talented people, to change firms. So having a culture that binds the firm together is critical.

That's why we did this so deliberately and we did so much planning, building consensus with the directors about what they wanted. We actually went through everything I do as managing director. We made lists and went through them and talked about them. We went over our governing documents about how decisions are made and decided they needed to be updated to keep up with the growth of the firm.

We are a consensus-driven firm. We discuss things with the directorship, seek input. Everyone has a voice. We put more things to a vote than maybe other firms do. And we reflected on that; is that something that serves us going forward? We kept the directors involved, and one thing that came out of that was the directors said, "We love that we get to vote and control the firm, but we've gotten so big we really need executive leadership. We'd like to let go a little and let the executive committee make some decisions."

So that's one thing that came out of this. It's an ongoing evolution.

What are some things you are excited about as you step into the chair position?

One of the primary roles for the chair position is to work closely with Byron. I have 19 years of experience as managing director, so I've been involved in everything over the years. So first and foremost, I'll be spending a lot of time with Byron, helping him and answering questions, and I'm excited by that. Byron is a fantastic lawyer; he's a great leader; and he's enthusiastic and bringing new energy.

And I'm excited to step back. I think I've made my mark on the firm, and it really is time for some new energy and ideas.

Second, I'll be stepping back from the administrative side and spending more time on client needs and client feedback, and I'm excited about that. I really do like talking to clients.

And third, I'm thinking about what my law practice will be. I really love being a lawyer, and as managing director I did a lot less lawyering — and I miss it.

--Editing by Nicole Bleier.