

New law firm emerges as Clark, Thomas & Winters continues to shrink

By [Patrick George](#)

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SAN MARCOS — About half the lawyers from the Clark, Thomas & Winters law firm announced Monday that they are forming a new firm working out of the same offices, at least temporarily. The announcement may signal the eventual demise of one of the city's most venerable law firms.

The new firm, Duggins Wren Mann & Romero, LLP, will open with 29 attorneys. Major practice areas will be in energy and public utilities, environmental law, commercial litigation and commercial law, appellate law, administrative law, corporate and securities law, and state and local taxation, firm officials said.

Senior partners David C. Duggins, Casey Wren, James Mann and Celina Romero all worked for Clark Thomas, along with managing partner David Gilliland and 24 other attorneys, officials said.

Chuck McDonald, a spokesman for Clark Thomas, said the new entity "represents the significant core" of the older firm. Its offices will remain for the time being on the 15th floor at the 300 West Sixth Street building, where Clark Thomas is located.

Gilliland emphasized Monday that the new firm of Duggins Wren Mann & Romero is exactly that — a new firm, not Clark Thomas under a different name.

"This is a completely new venture," Gilliland said. "We have good practices and stable clients. It's just the best for everyone involved."

Gilliland said Duggins Wren Mann & Romero hopes to move into a new office at One American Center at West Sixth Street and Congress Avenue this summer. He said he does not know what will happen to Clark Thomas.

Clark Thomas was the oldest — and at one point largest — law firm in Austin. It was founded in 1938 and had strong ties to former President Lyndon Johnson. But its future has been in doubt recently. Nine lawyers who made up a substantial portion of the firm's pharmaceutical practice joined the new Austin office of Minneapolis-based Bowman and Brooke LLP in February. Its website lists 64 attorneys, down from 120 in 2009. Asked Monday whether Clark Thomas is going out of business, McDonald said only that the firm is in downsizing mode.

The history of Clark Thomas has also been interwoven with the Pedernales Electric Cooperative — the two Central Texas institutions had a 70-year relationship and mutual origins linked to LBJ and his associates. The firm has also had a role in Pedernales' legal troubles of the last few years.

In May, former Clark Thomas attorney Walter Demond goes on trial on charges of felony theft, misapplication of fiduciary property and money laundering. He was the former top outside lawyer for Pedernales and the head of the law firm's energy division.

He faces the same charges as the co-op's convicted former general manager, Bennie Fuelberg, who was sentenced to five years of probation and 300 days in the Blanco County Jail.

Prosecutors allege that Demond and Fuelberg arranged for hundreds of thousands of co-op dollars to be funneled to relatives of Pedernales officials. They were the only people indicted as a result of a state attorney general's investigation into the co-op's affairs.

Clark Thomas partners Larry McNeill and Duggins were called to testify at Fuelberg's trial in December, and a number of attorneys and employees from the firm are expected to testify at Demond's trial as well.

Officials at Clark Thomas said their current troubles — including the steady drain of staff — had less to do with Pedernales and more to do with an economy that has been tough on large firms across the country.

pgeorge@statesman.com; 512-392-8750

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