

## Group hopes to bring law school back to Tacoma

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**Published:** May 25, 2013 at 7:04 p.m. PDT— **Updated:** May 25, 2013 at 7:04 p.m. PDT

Twenty years after Seattle University bought the South Sound's only law school, a group of business and civic leaders has a plan to bring a legal-degree program back to Tacoma.

The idea is to create a second campus of the University of Washington's School of Law. It would start small, with just 30 students, and it would be an evening program to target working professionals who live and work in the area. The faculty would be five full-time instructors recruited specifically to teach here.

"We are an urban-serving university," Debra Friedman, chancellor of the University of Washington Tacoma, said last week. "We are very responsive to what our community has in mind. My motivation is to make sure there's top talent in Tacoma and the South Sound."

A 12-person steering committee working on the plan say the state's three law schools — Seattle University, the UW and Gonzaga — don't adequately serve the South Sound region and its specialized needs including environmental issues, urban planning and business development. Since the next closest law school is in Portland, the UWT law classes would draw from a wide area, from South King County to Thurston County and beyond.

More strategically, offering such a degree would be another way for Tacoma and Pierce County to continue to grow its own talent. Entrepreneurs and business leaders often have, or seek, a law degree to further develop skills in critical thinking and risk analysis.

"We're focused on people who live and work and want to practice in the South Sound — people who can't afford to take off work for three years and go into debt and quit their

jobs to get their legal degree,” said Stephanie Bloomfield, president of the Pierce County Bar Association and steering committee member.

Law school graduates tend to live and work near where they studied, committee members say, creating deep relationships that underpin the civic and business climate.

The practice of law “is a public trust,” said Valarie Zeeck, a partner at top Tacoma law firm Gordon Thomas Honeywell, who has nurtured this idea from its germination around a dinner table about a year ago. “Having lawyers in one community who have roots there contributes to the success of that community.”

The idea is now in a due-diligence phase. The committee used member donations to hire a consultant, who over the next few weeks is interviewing approximately 65 professionals across Tacoma to determine whether the community will support the school in service and spirit — and with cash.

The committee estimates the program’s start-up cost is \$2.25 million. That breaks down to \$750,000 a year for three years — enough to produce the first class of graduates.

“Yes, it’s a lot of money,” Zeeck said. “But it’s not a very big ask for a law school in a community. We’re not asking for \$25 million to build a building and get accreditation.”

The money would cover the hiring of five full-time faculty members at bare minimum cost, Friedman said. The UWT would cover other costs associated with the program, including providing classroom space, library services, and administrative functions, such as application processing.

After the first three years, the university would take over the program. If it’s successful, it would be the latest advanced degree offered by the UWT, which now has graduate programs in nine areas, including nursing, business and education.

The start-up number “is definitely an achievable mark,” said Tom Pierson, president and CEO of the Tacoma-Pierce County Chamber. “It’s an incredible value for what the return will be. People will look back at something like that and say, ‘Really? That’s all it took?’”

## **21 YEARS**

The University of Puget Sound formed its law school in 1972 with nine faculty members including the dean, and 427 students, according to a school history written by Anita Steele, one of its first professors and director of the law library. It received American Bar Association certification a short time later, with a member of the inspection team noting that UPS “may have set some sort of record in taking its law school from the ‘drawing board’ to the operational phase.”

Twenty-one years later, in 1993, UPS announced it had sold its law school to Seattle University and would move out of Tacoma by 1999. The community backlash was immense. The school faced enormous criticism from local leaders, lawyers, judges and students for the city’s immeasurable loss.

State and local lawmakers, UW officials and others tried for a few years to replace the educational opportunity. Nothing came to pass, though demand for such education remained. In 2002, just three years after the law school left Tacoma, a UW survey of 77 legal employers in the South Sound region showed most of them said they struggle to recruit and hire new lawyers.

## **WORKER SHORTAGES**

It’s now 11 years after that study. The steering committee for the latest effort, in a five-page overview of its plan, notes that the legal profession is facing a shortage of people in the near future. According to a survey by the Washington State Bar Association cited by the committee, a quarter of the state’s practicing attorneys plan to retire in the next five years. Almost three-quarters of the WSBA membership is 50 years old or older.

It’s hard to square that with current statistics that show the nation now has more lawyers than jobs in the profession. Every one of the dozen attorneys interviewed by The News Tribune acknowledged the contradiction, but noted that any law school in Tacoma likely wouldn’t produce lawyers until several years from now.

“I’m in a business where I’m always thinking five to 10 years out,” Friedman said. “The present demand for lawyers is less relevant than what it will be.”

Friedman believes there is pent-up demand for continuing education in the South Sound. The success of UWT's other specialized degree programs prove it, she said.

Last fall, the school announced it was offering a MEDEX program, an expansion of the UW School of Medicine's program to train physician assistants. Some 80 people applied for just 26 slots. This summer, the school's doctoral program for educational leadership will begin with 40 students, all of whom have full-time jobs ranging from primary school principals to nurse managers from local hospitals.

Most recently, the school announced it would offer a master's degree in cybersecurity. The first classes begin in June. The school is planning for 26 students, and 43 have applied. Eighteen of those have military backgrounds, UWT spokesman Mike Wark said.

## **COMMUNITY BENEFIT**

Friedman said offering a legal degree at the UWT would continue its tradition of working with the community on education it says it needs.

"We're working on clean water technology in conjunction with our government and private partners. We're building a lab on campus that will be open to others. The YMCA just partnered with us to build a new facility," she said. "We have 10 things going on with (Joint Base Lewis McChord) that weren't going on two years ago."

Both Pierce County's Prosecutor Mark Lindquist and chief public defender Michael Kawamura said having law students in Tacoma would benefit the justice system. It would bring a higher quality pool of candidates for eventual courtroom work, they said, and those students also would provide free or low-cost legal services.

In the two decades since the South Sound region lost its law school, attorneys in Kitsap and Thurston counties have been creative about recruitment and hiring, particularly to ensure interns are available year-round. The Thurston County prosecutor's office has a program for legal interns designed to draw students from across the country, including working with schools who allow students to work entire semesters in exchange for class credit.

Having a law school in Tacoma “would be fabulous,” said Christy Peters, the Thurston County prosecutor’s administration chief. “It would be an easier connect. We’re working on staffing a family justice center where the need will be great. We want to set up ongoing student clinics.”

## **LONG ROAD**

In addition to Zeeck and Bloomfield, the steering committee includes some well-known names, such as federal Judge Robert Bryan; Columbia Bank CEO Melanie Dressel; former state Supreme Court justice Gerry Alexander; News Tribune publisher David Zeeck, who is married to Valarie Zeeck; and businessman Herb Simon, who also is a UW regent.

Any plan to expand the UW’s law school to Tacoma will have many procedural and political hoops to jump through. The law school’s faculty will have a say, as will the Seattle campus’s president and provost. Ultimately the board of regents must approve.

The dean of the UW School of Law, Kellye Testy, said she has been aware of the steering committee’s work from the beginning and that she was happy the group is doing a feasibility study.

“I don’t know the answer” to whether expanding the school is the right thing, she said. “Our law school is a really strong one, and I want to make sure everything we do is top quality and enhances our program.”

She knows the value of a law school to a community. She was a faculty member at the UPS law school before it moved to Seattle, where later she became the dean. She noted the region’s growth, especially with the presence of JBLM.

“It’s not like we don’t have students who are working in the South Sound, but it’s different when people commute,” she said. “The community really values having students dedicated to being there. If they go to school there, they want to stay.”

One Tacoma native and Seattle University law student wishes staying closer to home had been an option. Tom Glassman, 28, is in his first year of law school while his wife,

Deanna, is in her first year of medical school at the UW. Tom Glassman grew up in Tacoma and met Deanna at UPS.

“My wife is from Missoula, Montana,” he said. “She fell in love with Tacoma. She always had this plan that we would stay in Tacoma and live our lives here.”

The decision to move to Seattle to pursue their degrees was a difficult one. They liked their large apartment, which was affordable and close to family. They thought long and hard about commuting from Tacoma but ultimately decided it wouldn't work.

“There are a ton of kids who go to law school from UPS,” Glassman said. “They fall in love with Tacoma and want to stick around and can't. They feel like they have to leave Tacoma to pursue their goals.”

*Information from News Tribune archives was included in this report.*

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