NJ Attorney General Fields Questions at Business Forum

By Diane C. Walsh
Editor, COMMERCE

New Jersey Attorney General Matthew J. Platkin made himself available to answer questions from the business community recently during a special virtual meeting moderated by CIANJ President Anthony Russo.

Platkin became the state's highest ranking law enforcement officer early last year. He had previously served as chief counsel to Gov. Phil Murphy. A Stanford Law School graduate, Platkin had also been a partner at Lowenstein Sandler, working in the firm's white-collar crime and business litigation practice groups, before accepting the governor's appointment.

As attorney general, Platkin, who grew up in Morris County and now lives in Montclair with his family, heads the state Department of Law and Public Safety. It employs 8,000 people and encompasses 18 divisions, including the State Police and Consumers Affairs, which oversees the licensing requirements of 51 professions. There are more than 500 lawyers employed by the department. Platkin explained to the meeting participants that in what's unique to New Jersey, his attorneys provide counsel to all state agencies, effectively making it the state's largest law firm.

The New Jersey Warehouse and Movers Association, the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association, as well as the NJCPA, the association of accountants, who are all affiliated with CIANJ, took the opportunity with Platkin to press him on their members' hot topics.

Tracy Denora, executive director of the movers' association, asked Platkin's assistance for better enforcement of a new law that targets rogue movers who scam the public. The association helped draft the law and Murphy signed it in 2019. The Public Movers Act gives local police the right to check movers' credentials and issue summonses, if warranted. Any fines imposed are also shared with the local authorities.

The state Division of Consumers Affairs conducted "only four stings" on illicit movers since 2012, netting $283,000 in fines, according to Denora, who said it is "heartbreaking" that fraudsters are victimizing the public and tarnishing the reputations of legitimate movers.

Jason Washburn, a general manager at Two Men & A Truck, told the attorney general that rogue movers have been operating under his company's name and on several occasions extorted money from customers by refusing to unload their property unless they paid more than they agreed previously. "It's a huge negative impact on our business and our reputation," he said.

Platkin promised to follow-up with the local prosecutor's office on the incidents Washburn presented. The attorney general also said the new laws are being enforced and the latest reports show consumer affairs collected $75,000 in penalties. "If we can do more," Platkin said he was willing to discuss the situation further with the movers' association after the virtual session.

Another new law being drafted by the state Department of Environmental Protection instigated the landscapers' association and others working in the environmental industry to question the attorney general. At issue is the license for handling contaminated soil. Under the procedure, all principles in a firm would have to undergo extensive criminal background checks.

Tom Uzzo, the president of Whitestone Associates, Inc., which does extensive site remediation work, explained his firm is employee-owned and under the new regulations all 100 of them would have to submit to the background investigation. The landscapers' association also complained the new regulations were overreaching. Tracy Straka, an executive at Creamer Environmental, wanted to know what the consequences are. "Do we lose our license? Do we fire the employee?" she asked.

While Platkin said he could not discuss specific applications, he urged the participants to be as candid and detailed as possible when making their applications. "Our goal is not to jam people up in the licensing process," he said.

He noted the regulation has not been finalized and there is still opportunity to bring comments to the DEP.

Jeff Kaszerman of the NJCPA urged Platkin to use funds collected by the licensing boards for a more efficient consumer affairs division. Platkin acknowledged there was a "significant backlog" in licensing and disciplinary actions due to the pandemic and staffing issues. But he said additional hires have been made and Gov. Murphy budgeted more funds for the division. "I think we're moving in the direction you will like," he said.

To listen to the entire conversation, go to Virtual Events – CIANJ.



Photo: Getty Images/iStockphoto/Motortion



Photo: Getty Images/iStockphoto/SimplyCreativePhotography

Catching rogue movers and questions over new licensing requirements for moving contaminated soil were among the topics the business community brought to Attorney General Matthew J. Platkin.