

# Daily Journal

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## TOP BOUTIQUES IN CALIFORNIA 2021



OLIVAREZ  
MADRUGA  
LEMIEUX  
O'NEILL

LOS ANGELES

PUBLIC ENTITY LAW

Left to Right: Partners Thomas M. Madruga, Inés Kuperschmit, Rick R. Olivarez, Christine K. Hsu and Terence J. Gallagher • PETE ESCOBAR/ DAILY JOURNAL

The partners of Olivarez Madruga Lemieux O'Neill, LLP have a simple hiring philosophy as they continue to grow their 60-person public entity law firm: "hire great people first and good lawyers second."

"You can always learn to be a good lawyer, but we can't teach you to be a great person," name partner Thomas M. Madruga said. "If you're a great person, then the learning will come. That's an acquired skill-set. Your character and personality come from within."

Mostly focusing on defense, the firm provides public entities with transactional and litigation services in municipal, water, environmental and toxic tort law. Firm founder Rick R. Olivarez currently serves as city attorney to El Monte, La Puente and Bell Gardens. He previously held the same role for the cities of San Fernando and Cudahy, which the firm also represents.

The firm gained a landmark plaintiff win in August 2020, representing the Compton Unified School District in a challenge against the use of SAT and ACT test scores in the state public school system. *Smith v. Regents of the University of California*, RG19046222 (Alameda Co. Super. Ct., filed Dec. 10, 2019).

Along with Public Counsel, the firm argued that the use of SAT and ACT scores discriminates against applicants based on race, income and disability. Under the terms of the final settlement, signed in 2021, University of California admissions officers will no longer consider standardized test scores through at least 2025, even if students submit them.

Telling the story of how he founded the firm in 2010 by spending almost all of his retirement savings, Olivarez said he left another law firm hoping to become the "Jerry Maguire" of lawyers—

always dedicated to ethics and his clients.

"I felt there was an opportunity to do the kind of work that I was doing at the other firm, which was mostly public entity work, but in a way that I felt was more ethical, and really supported the elected officials, particularly the new ones, because there are so many rules and other types of pitfalls that they have to be aware of," Olivarez said.

As he began signing more clients, he joined forces with his friend Madruga, who he met years prior, to form Olivarez Madruga. Continuing to gain steam and clients, the pair called Steven O'Neill, who over the course of two years helped facilitate a merger with Lemieux & O'Neill—a long-time boutique firm specializing in transactional and litigation work in municipal, water, environmental, and toxic tort law.

In a recent water law case, the firm, led by Keith Lemieux, suc-

cessfully represented Antelope Valley-East Kern Water Agency. Antelope Valley Groundwater Cases 2021 DJDAR 3269.

The cases involved a sprawling dispute over groundwater supply in an aquifer underlying what the court called the Antelope Valley Adjudication Area in northern Los Angeles County and southeast Kern County.

After a plaintiff appealed the Los Angeles Superior Court judgement, the 5th District Court of Appeal found the lower court's rulings did not "violate California's water law principles, were consistent with the settlement, were not an abuse of the trial court's discretion to construct a fair and just allocation of the available water and the plaintiff was afforded an adequate notice and opportunity to present its contentions as part of the lengthy process of crafting the final Physical Solution."

—Blaise Scema