



# THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

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Back-tax chasers: Law firm collects for a grateful Memphis government

By Daniel Connolly

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As the economic crisis mounts, cities nationwide are coping with potentially devastating financial shortfalls.

As tax revenues plunge, it is critical that cities collect as much in owed taxes as possible.

That need is being tapped by law firms like Linebarger, Goggan, Blair & Sampson.

In Memphis between April 2004 and September 2008, the firm collected a total of \$114.3 million in fees, interest and penalties. The city paid it \$13.6 million for its work.

"They need us, they need us in this financial crisis," said DeMetris Sampson, one of the firm's managing partners.

Austin, Texas-based Linebarger occupies an unusual niche in the legal world: Its work consists almost entirely of collecting unpaid taxes for 1,900 local, state and federal government agencies nationwide.

It has more than 1,500 employees and has a high percentage of female and minority attorneys. A 2004 article by the magazine *Texas Lawyer* said 32 percent of the firm's lawyers were minorities, the biggest proportion of any large firm in the state.

The firm has had a contract with the city of Memphis since 2004, and its current agreement expires at the end of this year.

It has three lawyers and 10 support staff who file lawsuits and make phone calls to debtors, and can also draw on a national staff to handle tasks such as mass mailings.

Sampson said that governments need its work more than ever in the current recession.

Without an efficient system to enforce tax laws, governments must boost rates on those who do pay, she said.

In Memphis, the firm's primary target is back property taxes on homes and businesses. The debts must be 17 months past due before the city gives them to the firm.

The firm provides its services at no cost to cities because it charges taxpayers service fees of up to 20 percent -- fees that are set by state law -- on top of what they owe, Sampson said.



Managing attorney Pamela Pope Johnson (left) and managing partner DeMetris Sampson say of their collection work: "We never give up!"

At the same time, the firm tries to work out fair payment schedules with people who have fallen behind on taxes because of illnesses or other unforeseen events, she said.

Its workers are both skilled and relentless at recovering taxes, she said.

"The issue is, we don't give up," she said. "We don't give up!"

Sampson also said the organization believes in active participation in the communities where it operates.

Charitable work helped the firm win an honor from a lawyers' association.

It received the 2008 Making the Difference Award from the Memphis-based Ben F. Jones Chapter of the National Bar Association, an organization of African-American attorneys.

Chapter president Van D. Turner Jr. cited the firm's sponsorship of activities such as the association's scholarship fundraising ball, which assists students at the Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law at the University of Memphis. Linebarger also helped pay for the association's new Web site, Turner said.

"They've donated so much of their time and money toward various projects and community events that the NBA sponsored this past year," Turner said.

-- Daniel Connolly: 529-5296

Linebarger, Goggan, Blair & Sampson

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Web site: [publicans.com](http://publicans.com)

Managing attorney, Memphis: Pamela Pope Johnson

Local employees: 13

Local telephone: 528-1844

National office: Austin, Texas

National employees: More than 1,500

National government clients: About 1,900.