

Offit Kurman to open downtown office

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Offit Kurman is opening a 10-lawyer office in downtown Baltimore, a move that heats up competition for clients in the city's central business district.

The Howard County law firm has been one of the region's fastest growers, more than doubling from 41 lawyers in 2008 to 85 attorneys today. Until now, all that growth has come outside the city. The suburban Maple Lawn firm opened outposts in Owings Mills, Bethesda, Tysons Corner, Va., Wilmington, Del., and Philadelphia, but lacked a presence in Baltimore.

That will change March 2 when Offit Kurman, Baltimore's 15th-largest law firm, opens at 300 E. Lombard St. The 8,500-square-foot space could eventually house 19 lawyers. The firm intends to fill those offices quickly, said Ted Offit, managing partner and co-founder. Offit's plan is to merge in smaller law firms with as many as 10 lawyers, or attract sole practitioners who will bring their clients with them. That's the same strategy Offit used to expand the firm before.

"We intend to be aggressive about it," he said. "We want to do it as soon as possible."

Offit Kurman's move into Baltimore comes as Chicago-based Exelon Corp., which is nearing a deal to acquire Baltimore's Constellation Energy Group Inc., chose to bypass downtown as the site of its new Baltimore headquarters. It plans to build that office at Harbor Point, a decision that disappointed some downtown backers.

That one of the region's largest law firms wants to set up shop in the city's traditional business core is a boost for downtown, meaning more customers for its restaurants and retail, said Kirby Fowler,



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(From left) Tim Lynch, Ted Offit and Howard Kurman of Offit Kurman.

president of the Downtown Partnership of Baltimore.

"Particularly for law firms, downtown is an optimal place to do business," Fowler said. "It continues to reinforce downtown as a center of commerce for the region."

Offit Kurman's decision to come downtown also says something about the firm's aspirations, said Pam Woldow, a law firm consultant. When a suburban law firm moves into the city it shows the firm wants to be more of a player in the legal market, said Woldow, a partner at Edge International.

"It's a prestige issue," Woldow said. "You're signaling to the marketplace that you have the type of practice and the type of lawyers that demand having an office in a major location."

Meanwhile, Offit Kurman is serious about its incursion into Baltimore. Nine of the lawyers moving downtown are part-

ners. They include two lawyers on the firm's management committee — name partner Howard Kurman, a former general counsel for the Baltimore Sun, and Timothy Lynch, a commercial litigator. Joseph Bellinger, who heads Offit Kurman's bankruptcy practice, will also be moving downtown. Ted Offit plans to spend a day there each week. It will cost about \$450,000 to open its new office, Offit said.

Offit said the firm's prospective lawyers have told him that opening a new office downtown would make joining the firm more attractive. Some already practice downtown and don't want to move to the suburbs. Others live north of the city in Baltimore and Harford counties and don't want to commute to Howard County.

"We think this will increase our brand appeal," Offit said. "It's build it and they will come."