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Texas Lawyers Quarterback the Legal Team for the Big Game

BY BRENDA SAPINO JEFFREYS

HOUSTON LAWYER TOM AJAMIE isn't a big football fan. He doesn't regularly watch professional football games on Sundays or participate in a fantasy football league. But Ajamie will be at NRG Stadium in Houston on Feb. 5 for Super Bowl LI because his firm is outside counsel to the Houston Super Bowl Host Committee.

"I will go to the game. I don't know if I can sit, or have to work," he said.

For more than a year-and-a-half, Ajamie and lawyers with Ajamie LLP have focused on the biggest game in football by assisting the host committee with contracts, negotiations, fundraising, coordinating with governmental agencies, advising on public information act requests, risk management and troubleshooting.

"It is a big piece of work," Ajamie said.

Lawyers from Winstead have been working for the Houston Super Bowl Host Committee even



Lawyers and paralegals from Ajamie LLP in Houston in the offices of client the Houston Super Bowl Host Committee. Front row, from left, lawyers Ryan van Steenis, Courtney Scobie, Dona Szak, Tom Ajamie. Back row, from left, paralegals Tom Neumayr and Sam Campbell.

longer. Denis Braham, a shareholder in Houston who is co-chair of the sports business and public venues industry group, said the firm helped the Houston Super Bowl Bid Committee prepare the bid for the 2017 game, and also represented the committee in 2000 when it successfully won the bid for Super Bowl XXXVIII in 2004.

Braham said that after the committee won the bid in 2013 for the upcoming Super Bowl, the name of the committee changed to the Houston Super Bowl Host Committee, and his firm started immediately working on contracts related to the bid.

"We worked through the whole bid process on behalf of all of the

stakeholders in Houston—the city, Houston First Corp., the Greater Houston Convention & Visitors Bureau, the Houston Texans and other important constituents including the county and NRG Park,” he said.

Led by Houston shareholder David Staas, Winstead is also helping the committee apply for reimbursement of expenses through Texas’ Major Events Reimbursement Program, Braham said.

Braham said the firm devoted hundreds upon hundreds of hours on the bid process. He said all of his time has been pro bono, and work of others at the firm is billed at a “very nice discount.”

Sallie Sargent, the president and CEO of the Houston Super Bowl Host Committee, said Winstead is concentrating much of its work on dealings with the National Football League and contracts related to the bid document. Ajamie LLP is doing more work on contracts with entertainers, venues, news media and volunteers, she said.

She said she talks with Braham and Tom Ajamie on a weekly if not daily basis, because there’s always some complication. “Contracts are subject to interpretation,” she said.

Tom Ajamie’s firm does litigation and risk avoidance, but one kind of legal work his firm isn’t doing for the committee is litigation, which is a good thing in Ajamie’s view.

“I’m not asking for litigation, but if it happens we are ready, here, on call,” he said. He said they have been doing a lot of preventative counseling, by advising the committee on ways to ward off litigation and reduce liability, but much of the work is contracts. The firm has handled at least 60 contracts for the host committee as of Jan. 6, and that total may hit 100 before the big day arrives, he said.

Ajamie’s firm applied for the job as outside counsel to the host committee only after Sargent approached him about the opportunity. Ajamie said he and Sargent, a professional event organizer, went to elementary school together in Scottsdale, Arizona, and she contacted him after seeing his name as a sponsor in a Houston Grand Opera program.

Ajamie said his firm participated in the beauty contest for the outside counsel job, and the committee hired Ajamie LLP close to two years ago. That was after the host committee and Winstead had already started doing work on the game and the 10 days of events and activities leading up to the Super Bowl including the Super Bowl LIVE fan festival in downtown Houston.

Ajamie said the work is varied. For instance, he said, the committee had to get approvals from the city of Houston to close down certain streets to accommodate activities. Among many things, the committee

“locked down” all the hotel rooms, Ajamie said, and it controls booking for venues. He said there are more than 130 private corporate parties connected with the Super Bowl, and his firm helped with contracts for venues for those events, and for entertainers including halftime performer Lady Gaga.

Ajamie said the Houston Super Bowl Host Committee is one of 40 major matters the 12-lawyer firm is currently working on. He said he personally devotes at least a few hours a week to the client, but other lawyers at the firm including partner Dona Szak and senior counsel Courtney Scobie and associate Ryan van Steenis are doing more of the day-to-day work.

The firm, which typically does half of its litigation on an alternative or contingency-fee basis, is billing the host committee on an hourly basis, he said. He said some of his time is donated on a “value-added” basis.

Szak, who spends so much time at the Houston Super Bowl Host Committee offices that she has a desk there, said she has spent at least half of her time over the last couple months on contract negotiations for the host committee to help it secure venues for events and food service and liquor contracts, establish volunteer agreements, and ink performance contracts with artists. “Working on an event like this, it’s a once-in-a-lifetime experience,” she said.