

How I Made Practice Group Chair: 'It All Happens in a Flow,' Says Tory Lauterbach of Gibson Dunn

By Law.com Staff

October 2, 2026

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Job title: Co-chair of the energy regulation and litigation practice group

Practice area(s): Energy regulation and litigation

Law school and year of graduation: The University of Texas School of Law, 2009

The following has been edited for style.

How many years have you been at your firm?

Two years

What made you pick your practice area?

It started with a fear, honestly. As a summer associate in litigation, I watched first-year associates get assigned to whatever case happened to be busy that year—and then spend a decade on it. I found that intimidating. What if I didn't find the subject interesting? So I flipped the question: why not pick a field I knew I'd find interesting for an entire career, so I'd never get bored?

Energy was the answer. I'd always been drawn to it from a policy perspective—it touches everything from the economy to foreign affairs. Graduating in 2009, the questions felt enormous: Were we going to run out of oil? Would renewables ever be viable? Here was a chance to work in that space and help solve genuinely hard problems.

Energy regulatory work, specifically, appealed to the political nerd in me. Regulation meant engaging with Congress, with the agencies implementing the laws Congress passes—being in the room where policy becomes practice. So I picked a field I cared about, then focused on the part of it that felt most personally meaningful.

How did you develop your expertise in your practice area?

My practice has always been shaped by trends in the energy industry. I started out in energy and commodities work, coming out of the deregulation of the energy markets and the introduction of retail competition, which was the big story of the early 2000s. Then came the shale gas boom, and for a while I was a dedicated gas lawyer. After that, transmission investment became a major priority for the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, so I worked on the regulatory issues around financing and building out electricity transmission. Then renewables gained traction as the infrastructure became cheaper to build and easier to finance—and I got to achieve a longtime goal of working on some really exciting renewables projects.

And then the data center boom, which brings all of it together. These projects need enormous amounts of energy, so you have to understand the markets. They have to buy power to consume it, which raises state regulatory questions. You have to build the transmission to serve these massive loads. And there's the question of what fuel fires them—a mix of natural gas and zero-carbon resources, whether nuclear or renewables. At every stage, I worked on the most challenging issue of the day, and it built on itself.

Gibson Dunn is where that came together. I moved over before I had any idea the data center boom



Courtesy photo

**Tory Lauterbach
of Gibson Dunn &
Crutcher.**

would become as consequential as it has, and this platform—a focused practice inside a huge, multidisciplinary firm—has let me develop a practice right at the center of data center energy supply. It's taken me to some exciting and unexpected places.

Why did you want to become a practice area leader?

When you build out your own practice, you naturally start thinking about what you find interesting and where you believe the market is headed. But those questions get far more exciting when you ask them as a group: Where can the firm take this? What kinds of representation can we bring to clients as a team?

For me, leadership isn't about a title or a line on a resume. It's about a team-based philosophy of practicing law—and the chance to help guide the strategy of a tremendous institution, full of brilliant people, in one of the most dynamic spaces in the global economy.

There are so many opportunities in energy and data centers right now, and this is the moment to build new ways of working and new structures within the firm to make sure we're maintaining and enhancing a market-leading practice. Gibson Dunn is uniquely positioned to shine here. With the combined strength of our infrastructure, project finance, real estate, energy, and M&A practices, I don't think there's another firm in the world with this set of capabilities. I couldn't be more thrilled to be in the room with other leaders, thinking about how to harness that talent and deliver for our clients.

What skill sets do you need to be an effective practice group leader (i.e., knowing more about the practice, hiring, business development, financial management, etc.)?

Balance is a funny word. Honestly, I'm not sure there is a balance—there's just the work, all of it at once. Some people would call these competing priorities: the client matters, mentoring associates, strategic decisions about hiring, decisions about which clients to pitch, and where to expand our representation. For me it comes from taking a holistic view, where it's all of the above. That may not be the most relaxing way to practice law, but it's among the most exciting.

It all happens in a flow. When you're thinking about how best to serve a client, you're thinking about who to staff on the deal. When you're staffing the deal, you're thinking about which skills you want a member

of the team to have the chance to build. And once you're thinking about the skills your people are developing, you're thinking about who you should be telling about that talent. So it moves naturally from client work to mentorship and management to marketing.

One of the exciting things about practicing at this level is that you really do get to be an entrepreneur and a lawyer. I don't think people at big firms reflect on that often enough—we're building a business and building relationships with our clients every day. It's tremendously exciting.

What are key priorities for your practice area?

A few stand out. The first is continuing to build our capabilities—both by learning and by growing. Recruiting the best possible team is an exciting challenge: this is a highly regulated space, but it demands genuinely entrepreneurial lawyers. So it's about finding people who fit that profile, and just as importantly, building a culture of entrepreneurship within the group. That matters in a space this dynamic and business-driven.

Second is recognition. I believe we're already a market leader in energy and the load-growth environment, and among the lawyers serving it—but I want to make sure the market knows it. The goal isn't just to be market-leading, but market-defining: the strongest, most commercial legal and business partner our clients have.

Third is building a practice that stands the test of time. The lateral market is remarkably dynamic right now, and we want to be a destination practice—a place where lawyers come to learn, to grow, to build their own practice, and then to stay. It's a fantastic place to do all of those things.

Do you have a broader influence in this role over improving diversity at your firm? If yes, how so?

I think I do, but mostly by creating a culture within the energy practice where we get to be human and be lawyers at the same time. We're at a generational inflection point, and one thing is clear: there's no single way to look like a lawyer, and no single way to be a lawyer. What we can do is create an environment where people are encouraged to bring their whole selves to the office.

Practically, that shows up in things like flexible and part-time partnership arrangements. I know that isn't a viable path at every firm, but it is here. When you combine real flexibility with a culture that genuinely

welcomes the full range of who people are, you create an environment that isn't just more open to diverse backgrounds—it becomes a destination for people from a wide range of backgrounds and points of view.

Is succession planning a part of your role as a practice group leader, and if yes, how so?

It's a funny thing to talk about succession when you've only just started in the role—but I'm glad you ask, because when we say succession planning, what we're really talking about is building the bench. As practitioners, we're only as good as our team.

That shapes how we recruit. A lot of recruiting amounts to asking candidates what they can do for you. We try to come to the table with a compelling story about what we can do for them. We have a fantastic platform and a collaborative environment that I think is second to none in the industry. I've worked at a couple of firms, and there's no place like Gibson Dunn for teamwork and for building a team that can lead a client to a successful outcome on a complex, multidisciplinary transaction.

When we talk to candidates, we see a runway for each of them. We want people to come here to learn, develop, strategize, grow—and eventually take on leadership themselves. I learned something at a leadership summer camp as a kid that has stayed with me: followership and leadership go hand in hand. That's true of recruiting, too. We're not just recruiting followers; we're recruiting future leaders. That's a genuinely compelling opportunity.

Is there anything that surprised you about the role?

What surprised me most was how welcoming my fellow leaders across the firm have been in bringing me into the strategic and management side of things. Gibson Dunn is a deeply entrepreneurial place—I've said that a few times—but it's worth understanding that entrepreneurial also means teamwork here. It doesn't mean building a practice in a vacuum. We genuinely collaborate.

I think something that's under-discussed about being a practice group chair is that the job is about

collaboration as much as leadership. I spend more time working in teams now than I ever have, much of it thinking about how we bring a complex, sophisticated suite of talents and disciplines to our clients. Should that have surprised me? Maybe not. But getting to strategize with the other leaders here has been a genuine gift.

How has the role given you insights into client needs?

I had a bit of an epiphany about this on a walk recently: the value we provide our clients is really a combination of knowledge and counseling.

Clients come to us for legal advice, yes—but they also come to us for market knowledge. We see more deals than most of them do, so we have a feel for what's happening across the marketplace in a way that someone working within a single vertical at a company often can't. We can bring that fifty- or hundred-thousand-foot view to their initiatives, their deals, and their goals.

And because we've seen so much, we can also be a counselor—a sounding board. I think clients love working with us because we're both things at once. We have a sophisticated understanding of the industries we move through, and we also bring the discretion, creativity, and patient thoughtfulness to walk through the essential questions a client has to answer in order to close a deal or build a project.

Pairing those two things—deep knowledge of the industry with real judgment, discretion, and maybe just a little bit of trend-spotting, a little bit of a crystal ball—creates enormous value. It makes a real difference.

Is there any other advice you'd share for those looking to become a practice leader?

The biggest lesson I've taken from this: you don't have to wait for a title to lead. We often wait to be given permission to step into our best role—our power, our fullest selves. I don't think you have to wait.

There's a bit of "Field of Dreams" in it. If you start being a leader in your practice, you'll become a leader in your practice. It really is that simple. I only wish I'd known it sooner.