Knox McLaughlin Gornall & Sennett, P.C.
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Governmental Practice

The Governmental Practice Group of Knox McLaughlin Gornall & Sennett, P.C. represents a large number of public entities throughout Pennsylvania. Our attorneys put years of experience in governmental and public finance law to work for our clients. When necessary, we refer matters involving labor and employment law, workers' compensation law, and litigation to other attorneys within our firm who have the experience necessary to provide effective representation.

The Governmental Practice Group is the largest of its kind in our region. We help cities, townships, boroughs, authorities, and school districts solve their problems, from the routine to the complex, as we provide service in the following ways:

State and Local Government

- Provide counsel on parliamentary procedures for public meetings
- Counsel and advise on all matters of municipal liability and immunity
- Draft and resolve all matters involving municipal procurement, including public bidding issues
- Provide counsel on housing and urban development law
- Advise on general aviation legal matters and public utility law
- Counsel regarding eminent domain matters
- Provide general counsel to water and sewer authorities
- Provide counsel on port-related matters
- Advise on compliance with the Municipality Authorities Act, Sunshine Act, Public Official and Employees Ethics Act, Right-to-Know Law, and relevant Commonwealth codes and statutes

Education

- Advise on charter school issues
- Advise on constitutional issues affecting public school students
- Draft school board policies
- Advise on federal laws including No Child Left Behind Act, Children's Internet Protection Act, and Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act
- Prepare public contracts

- Provide advice and counsel at all levels of student disciplinary hearings and student due process rights
- Analyze and negotiate contract issues

Special Education

- Advise school districts on compliance with state and federal special education laws and regulations (IDEA and Section 504)
- Consult with administrators on school district legal responsibilities regarding Child Find, evaluations, FAPE, and LRE
- Represent districts and insurers in federal court actions under IDEA and Section 504 seeking compensatory and punitive damages and attorneys' fees
- Represent districts in state administrative due process hearings and state level appeals
- Assist in responding to OCR complaint investigations and Bureau of Special Education compliance investigations and appeals
- Advise school districts on discipline of special education students

Zoning and Land Use/Environmental

- Act as solicitor for governing bodies and zoning hearing boards in connection with variance requests, subdivision applications, and rezoning petitions
- Provide counsel on environmental compliance issues related to publicly owned/operated wastewater treatment facilities
- Advise and assist public bodies with Act 537/sewage facilities issues
- Represent public bodies in buying, selling, or developing potentially contaminated property

Labor and Employment

- Negotiate collective bargaining agreements
- Represent in grievance processing and labor arbitration
- Provide guidance on bargaining unit issues, union organization, and union-related litigation
- Advise and counsel on all aspects of employment law
- Represent in EEOC, PHRC, unemployment compensation, OSHA matters, and before other administrative agencies
- Prepare employment-related documents and agreements
- Counsel on employment matters
- Train and update management and supervisors on critical workplace issues

Litigation

- Defend civil rights, discrimination, employee benefit, and whistleblower claims
- Defend and prosecute contract claims
- Counsel and represent on tax assessment matters
- Provide representation in alternative dispute resolution, including arbitration and mediation
- Counsel on debarment of public contractors
- Advise on all matters of liability and immunity

Governmental Practice Litigation - Representative Experience

- Won a tax assessment valuation case on behalf of Erie area taxing bodies, resulting in additional past due taxes of nearly $1.2 million

- Successfully defended a tax assessment appeal on behalf of the Warren County Board of Assessment Appeals, in which the property owner sought to decrease the tax assessment on a multi-million-dollar manufacturing facility by half. The decision saved the taxing bodies from losing over $30,000 of annual tax revenue
- Successfully challenged a tax exemption case in Warren County on behalf of the taxing bodies. Following the hearing, the Court denied the property owner's request for a tax exemption, finding it was not an "institution of purely public charity" under the Pennsylvania Constitution
- Obtained a favorable decision from the Erie County Court of Common Pleas on behalf of Erie's Public Schools regarding a medical office building's property value, resulting in increased property tax revenue for the district
- Successfully defended school district against claims related to consolidation plan. Following bench trial in the Warren County Court of Common Pleas, the Court dismissed the claims
- Obtained a favorable decision from the Commonwealth Court on behalf of a school district client, reversing a trial court decision in a tax assessment case involving commercial property valuation
- Obtained favorable decision in a non-jury trial on behalf of the City of Meadville against Crawford County. The City filed a lawsuit against the County seeking an order compelling Crawford County to undertake a comprehensive countywide reassessment of all real property within the County. Following a two day trial, the court found that Crawford County's property tax system violates the uniformity clause of the Pennsylvania Constitution, requiring a countywide reassessment by 2030.
- Obtained summary judgment on behalf of the Erie-Western Pennsylvania Port Authority and its former executive director related to a public works contract that displaced a tenant. The tenant was suing for breach of contract and promissory estoppel seeking damages exceeding $1.2 million claiming the tenant's lease was wrongfully terminated. Following discovery, the court entered summary judgment in our client's favor dismissing the case.
- Obtained dismissal, with prejudice, of Sunshine Act lawsuit against municipal client
- Obtained dismissal, with prejudice, of lawsuit seeking writ of mandamus against township client
- Obtained compulsory nonsuit for municipal client in eminent-domain trial
- Obtained favorable decision from Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court for two school district clients, regarding mask mandates during COVID-19 pandemic – the first of its kind on this topic
- Obtained complete dismissal of putative class action involving breach of contract, business torts, and wage and hour claims against government contractor in federal court; plaintiffs voluntarily dismissed case with prejudice after a string of successful motions in client's favor

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