

Feds team up in new legal firm

Pair call partnership 'too good to pass up'

By Denny Walsh
Bee Staff Writer

One of the more glamorous pairings in Sacramento's legal community emerged last Friday with the announcement that U.S. Attorney Charles Stevens and his predecessor as eastern California's top federal prosecutor, George O'Connell, are starting their own firm.

Stevens, who was appointed by President Clinton in 1993, will step down Friday and Stevens & O'Connell will open for business next Monday on the 14th floor of the Wells Fargo Center, 400 Capitol Mall.

O'Connell, who was appointed by President Bush in 1991 and served until 1993, is leaving a partnership at Downey Brand Seymour & Rohwer, one of Sacramento's largest firms.

"The people at Downey Brand are great," O'Connell said. "I have a lot of good friends here. But this is an exciting and unique opportunity: Two lawyers with the background and experience we can bring to bear on complex civil litigation and white-collar crime defense. I don't know of an equivalent in Sacramento.



Bee photograph/Randy Pench
Charles Stevens is retiring Friday as U.S. attorney in Sacramento. He will open a law firm next week with his predecessor, George O'Connell.

"It's also a chance to build something from the ground up and put your stamp on it."

Stevens turned his back on a number of lucrative offers from firms in Sacramento and elsewhere. Like O'Connell, he described the venture as "too good to pass up."

"I can control my own professional destiny in terms of cases

Please see LEGAL, page B4

Legal: Coin flip decided top billing

Continued from page B1

and clients," said Stevens, "and not be accountable to a bureaucracy or management committee.

"Money may be illuminating, but it's not my guiding light. And frankly, big firms are not the only way to make money. A small firm can be very profitable in the longer run if it's run properly."

Stevens said the other motivator is being able to work with O'Connell — whom he described as "one of the very top litigators" in this area — and with Stephen Burns, who will also join the new firm.

Burns is leaving a partnership at the Sacramento office of San Francisco-based Marron Reid & Sheehy. He was a law school classmate of Stevens at the University of California, Berkeley's Boalt Hall and was an associate in the Sacramento office of Los Angeles-based Gibson Dunn & Crutcher when Stevens was a partner there.

The fourth member of the group is Craig Allison, an associate at Downey Brand.

While O'Connell, 46, is a Republican and Stevens, 40, is a Democrat, they agree that the "trust and respect" they have for one another transcend politics.

Both served as assistant U.S. attorneys in the Los Angeles-based Central District of California, although O'Connell departed that office for Sacramento a year before Stevens arrived.

O'Connell, a 1976 graduate of Harvard Law School, was a driving force behind the federal government's investigation of Capitol corruption and the resulting prosecution of members of both houses of the Legislature.

After Stevens moved to Sacramento, he and O'Connell became

good friends. The concept of joining forces first arose several months ago, Stevens said.

How did they decide who would get top billing? "We flipped a coin," Stevens said.

Both are recognized by their peers as intelligent and mentally tough, but O'Connell especially has a reputation for wanting to be the boss.

"It's rare that two lawyers with such well-developed and exceptional skills are able to forge an equal partnership," observed at-

torney Malcolm Segal, who knows both men well.

O'Connell said he has no qualms about becoming an equal partner with Stevens because there is so much mutual respect.

"It's sometimes easier to be a partner with another strong person because there's nothing to prove," he said.

"I look forward to working with them and against them," said Segal, who specializes in business litigation and the defense of white-collar crime.