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2020 Top 10 30-Something: Tyrone H. Thomas, Jr.

Interviews and Profiles





DEPUTY GC DIRECTOR, LEGAL

INVENERGY LLC

CHICAGO, IL, USA

AGE: 34

Is Invenergy a global leader in sustainable energy solutions or a real estate developer in the sustainable energy space? Sometimes it’s hard to tell, jokes Tyrone Thomas, because real estate is such a critical component of the business. Before an energy project can get off the ground, the company needs to obtain rights to the literal ground.

A typical industrial-scale wind farm requires anywhere from 25,000 to 50,000 acres (sometimes more). Given the size of their footprints, many of Invenergy’s projects are in rural communities. While Tyrone enjoys partnering with rural landowners (over whose land Invenergy obtains lease and easement rights to build a project), securing title insurance (a critical risk mitigation product, and a financing imperative) on rural property can be harder than it would be for commercial or residential real estate. Tyrone cites an intestacy example: “There are communities where everyone knows each other, and two generations of a family passed away without making a will. Their kids just moved into the house because everybody knows it’s their land.” In that case, the chain of title will need to be cleaned up before Invenergy can close on a financing or sale. Every project will have several issues to “cure,” ranging from life estates structured to create a potentially infinite number of lease signatories to incorrectly drawn property boundaries to preexisting leases for farming, timber, hunting, oil and gas exploration, or any other law school property exam question you could imagine.

To streamline the real estate work, Tyrone negotiated protocols with each of the major national title companies that outlined how they and Invenergy should collectively respond to title challenges on future projects. This framework allows project teams at Invenergy to better forecast and address potential issues, which greatly reduces the possibility that a transaction is derailed by some fatal flaw in the future. “People can run within a defined universe of authority and it makes us all more efficient,” he says. Recognizing that improvement is always an option, Tyrone organized several title summits last year (inviting some of each title company’s executives to Invenergy’s Chicago headquarters) to start a discussion about expanding the Invenergy title guidelines, and to further strengthen the partnership between those companies and Invenergy.

With his deep knowledge of Invenergy’s business, Tyrone is constantly looking for ways to contribute to the company’s success. During his time at Invenergy, Tyrone has been integral to the establishment of a comprehensive legal operations framework (including a developing diversity and inclusion component), the creation of a legal onboarding and continuing education process, the rollout of a suite of internal forms and processes for use by the legal department, and the launch of the company’s affinity group for persons of African Ancestry (Black and Brown @ Invenergy). Tyrone also manages a team of 15 people, who collectively work on hundreds of projects (both operational and in development). Tyrone believes his primary focus as a leader “is to ensure that my team (1) continuously executes at a high level, (2) works in an environment where they are taught how to execute at a high level, (3) is challenged to produce great work product every day, and (4) is celebrated when they succeed, and when they fail after a well planned and executed effort.”

When he was in high school in Philadelphia, Tyrone attended a legal explorers program hosted by a large law firm in the city. During the program, he would leave school early and go downtown to attend trials, participate in moot court exercises, and observe the glamorous parts of private practice. It set the course for the next several years of his life.

As a young commercial real estate lawyer, he volunteered countless pro bono hours, including for the DC Bar Pro Bono Program (helping clients through landlord/tenant disputes), the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless (helping clients apply for SSI benefits), Ayuda (helping clients apply for permanent resident status under VAWA), and Bet Tzedek (helping clients apply for ZRBG Holocaust pensions). Tyrone’s pro bono work gave him deep professional satisfaction, and satiated his natural desire to dig for details and problem solve.

After a few years in private practice, Tyrone’s journey led him to an in-house position, which was where he needed to be. At Invenergy, he garners industry expertise while working for a mission-driven company filled with smart, capable people who are empowered to ask “Why not?” on a daily basis.



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