Municipal law expert continues to make mark

By Tom Kinan

In the corner of his office stands a shovel.

A shiny shovel, inscribed with words that say a lot about the scope of Bill Hampton's legal career. It's a prized possession that speaks volumes about the caliber of work that the senior partner at Secret Wardle in Farmington Hills has produced over the past four decades as one of the finest municipal lawyers in the state.

His work for cities, townships, and county agencies has been so highly regarded over the years that he has been honored by the State Bar of Michigan with the Michael J. Franck Award in 2007 and the coveted Professionalism Award by the Oakland County Bar Association in 2010.

In addition, he is listed in the Best Lawyers in Metro Detroit and Best Lawyers in America in several areas of practice including municipal law.

But that shovel is strangely symbolic of the depth that Hampton will go to serve his clients, in this case the Oakland County Drain Commission. It is proof positive that they valued his legal counsel so much that they elected him to a second term as chairman after him.

A "drain, not a sewer," Hampton is quick to point out.

The somewhat dubious legal distinction came in 1989; some 12 years after he entered private practice following a 6-year stint on the Oakland County Circuit Court bench. The job came on the heels of a three-year stay in the State Legislature, where Hampton served as House Majority Leader and House Minority Leader during his 6 years in Lansing.

Still, the 70-year-old Hampton admits to a special fondness for that shovel, which was used in the groundbreaking ceremony for the drain in the City of Rochester Hills. It is indicative of his willingness to dig deep for the benefit of his clients, whether in matters of water resource management and environmental stewardship or in the increasingly high-stakes arena of property tax appeals.

It also signifies the ground-breaking role Hampton has played in helping establish Secret Wardle as one of the top municipal law firms in Michigan.

"When I joined the firm in 1977, we were focused mainly on insurance defense work," Hampton explained. "I saw an opportunity to generate business for our firm in municipal law, since there weren't too many lawyers specializing in that kind of work. I was appointed city attorney at Bloomfield Hills, and that led to a number of other municipal clients around Oakland County. We now have the largest municipal law practice in the state with 10 lawyers on staff concentrating solely on that area.

Shortly after he was named general counsel for Bloomfield Hills, Hampton was chosen to head the legal charge for Bloomfield Township, West Bloomfield Township, and the City of Auburn Hills. The firm now represents municipalities as Novi, Farmington, Farmington Hills, Bingham Farms, Walled Lake, Waterford Township, Independence Township, and Oakland Township among a host of other public bodies. Hampton maintains a regular presence at various city and township meetings, offering on-the-spot legal guidance to municipal officials while also personally handling many of their litigation matters.

On the first day of August, Hampton was beaming over an appellate victory for one of the firm's chief clients. The City of Pontiac, which had its roots in the former Pontiac Township, prevailed the day before in a property tax appeal decided in a 4-3 vote by the Michigan Supreme Court.

"We are litigating more and more cases involving tax tribunal work," Hampton said. "More businesses and individuals are challenging their property tax assessments in light of declining property values in the area. In the case involving Chrysler and Auburn Hills, the Supreme Court's ruling will save the city approximately $1.7 million in lost revenue. I expect that we will be handling an increasing number of cases in this area over the next few years."

Hampton, whose father Verne was an attorney, grew up in Pontiac and graduated from the old Pontiac High School, now known as Pontiac Central High School. He was class president his senior year and he would hold the same title as a senior at Michigan State University, where he graduated in 1960. His student leadership role at MSU enabled him to strike up a friendship with a lifelong admirer of John Hannah, president of the Big Ten University from 1941-49 and the first chairman of the United States Commission on Civil Rights. It also opened doors to the world of politics in which Hampton would serve as an aide to MSU professor Paul Bagwell in his 1960 Republican bid for governor.

"Bagwell ran for governor in 1958 and lost a close race to G. Mennen Williams," Hampton related. "At that time, the term for governor was only two years and Bagwell ran again in 1960, challenging Democratic John Swainson. Once again, he lost a tight race, but it was a great experience for me, allowing me to see the world around the state throughout the campaign, gaining a bird's-eye view of the political process. It really sparked my interest in politics."

But first there was law school.

Hampton, whose mother Mildred won a scholarship to Oberlin College, where she was a teacher, obtained his juris doctor from Wayne State University Law School in 1963 and practiced law with his father in Pontiac before pursuing his political aspirations.

In 1964, at the tender age of 26, the GOP nominee claimed a seat in the State Legislature, easily winning a 2-year term in the 63rd District, Republican district of Birmingham and Bloomfield Hills. His victory was noteworthy in several respects. It came over Democrat John Rogers, a fellow attorney with whom he has maintained lifelong ties. It also flew in the face of a Democratic presidential landslide led by Lyndon Johnson's landslide defeat of Republican Barry Goldwater. Hampton's win solidified his place as the youngest member of the House of Representatives, a home for many oily career politicians.

"That it was an education, to say the least," Hampton said of his first term in office in 1964.

Two years later, in 1966, Republican George Romney won in a landslide over incumbent Swainson, unexpectedly placing Hampton in the political spotlight. Impressed with his smarts and political savvy, Republican legislators elected Hampton House Majority Leader despite his youth.

It was pretty heady stuff to be the House Majority Leader at age 28," Hampton admitted. "I was suddenly in a position where I was meeting regularly with Governor Romney and Lieutenant Governor (William) Milliken to plan our strategy for getting the Governor's programs through the State House."

He enjoyed a 2-year run as head of the House of Representatives until the Democrats seized control of State Legislature in the 1966 elections, relegating Hampton to House Minority Leader for his final term in Lansing. Near the end of his third term in office, Hampton knew it was time to exit.

"After being there for three terms, I started hearing the same speeches over and over again," Hampton said. "It was like I came into a movie late, sat through the rest of the show, and then watched the beginning to see what I had missed. Then when I completed the cycle, I said to myself, 'This is where I came in and now it's time to go.'"

Others weren't quite so eager to see Hampton go so quietly, encouraging him to run for lieutenant governor in the 1970 election with GOP gubernatorial candidate William Milliken. The choice came down to Hampton and James Brickerly with Milliken opting for the latter, hoping that Brickerly would help him among two key voting blocks. "I fully understood their political strategy, since Brickerly was from Detroit and was Catholic, whereas I was Protestant and from the suburb," Hampton said. "It brought balance to the ticket and helped Milliken win the election."

Hampton's loyalty to the Republican cause would be rewarded later that year when Governor Milliken appointed him to an opening on the Oakland County Circuit Court, a vacancy created by the retirement of Judge Phillip Pratt to the U.S. District Court bench in Detroit. At age 32, Hampton would once again break ground as the youngest judge in the state.

"It was rather fortuitous," Hampton said of his court appointment. "It was not part of any master plan. The chips just fell into place. I thoroughly enjoyed my work on the bench and for several years served as chief judge of the Oakland County Circuit Court. It was a tremendous experience."

During his third term as judge, Hampton appeared destined for an even more coveted judicial post, landing among the finalists for a seat on the Michigan Supreme Court.

"The appointment eventually went to Jim Ryan, but I was truly honored to be one of two finalists for the opening," Hampton said.

In 1977, Hampton returned to private practice, a move made primarily for financial reasons as the married father of three young children, each of whom would eventually graduate from Cranbrook-Kingswood School, one of the top college-prep academies in the country. Hampton served as chairman of the board of Cranbrook Schools for two years and watched his children excel academically throughout their educational careers there.

Daughter Mary, a graduate of the University of Michigan, is an attorney and lives in the Washington, D.C. area with her husband James and two young children. Son Brad, a graduate of New York University, lives in Manhattan and is the general manager for singer-songwriter Laurie Anderson, traveling the world with the performance artist. Daughter Sarah, also an NYU grad, lives in Traverse City with her husband Karl and manages an upscale restaurant in the popular northern resort city. The couple is expecting their second child this fall.

Hampton and his wife Luanne have been married for 15 years and share a love of the law. She also served as an attorney with Secret Wardle, specializing in appellate and municipal work with the firm before retiring 10 years ago. She and her husband now enjoy traveling, spending time at their vacation homes, and keeping tabs on their children and grandchildren. They differ, however, when it comes to their favorite Big Ten team.

"We have a mixed marriage," Hampton smiled. "She's a U of M grad, while I'm MSU through and through."

Similarly, the law is a thread that runs through Hampton's family. His brother, Verne Hampton II, is an attorney with Dickinson Wright, while his brother-in-law, George Kubis, is a lawyer with Bartelz Long.

Over the years Hampton has held a number of important state posts in the legal community, chairing the State Officers Compensation Commission from 1994-98 and co-chairing the State Bar Committee on Judicial Qualifications from 1990-96. He recently completed a 6-year stay on the Michigan Attorney Discipline Board, the last two as chairman.

He also regularly serves as a court-appointed arbitrator, helping decide civil cases that otherwise would take years to wind their way through the court system. He recently heard a case involving the death of a 7-year-old boy killed last year when he was hit by a snowmobile while playing on the Huron River Valley. Testimony in the case was heard over the course of a day and Hampton rendered a decision shortly after the proceedings concluded.

"That is one thing I always believed in when I was judge, to rule on matters fairly and quickly," Hampton said. "The parties to the dispute deserve for justice to be swift."