

LAW WEEK COLORADO

The Entrepreneurial Law Dean

By **Matt Masich**
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DENVER — Phil Weiser, a University of Colorado law professor who has spent the last two years working in the Obama administration, returns next month as the law school's dean.

"I've been approached over the years by many law schools to consider being dean," he said. "The only search I ever entered was this search, because I love Colorado and I love the university."

Weiser, perhaps best known for founding the Silicon Flatirons Center for Law, Technology & Entrepreneurship, took a leave of absence from CU in July 2009 and moved to Washington, D.C. He served first as deputy assistant attorney general in the Department of Justice's antitrust division, then as senior adviser for technology and innovation at the White House's National Economic Council.

Weiser and his family — wife, Associate Professor Heidi Wald of the CU School of Medicine, daughter Aviva, almost 7, and son, Sammy, 3 — managed to keep their lives "in a state of suspended animation" while living in Washington. They return this month to the Denver home they left two years ago, which they rented out while living in the capital.

"The plan from Day 1 was that we would be on a leave of absence for two years and come back," Weiser said. "My plan to come back was not initially to be dean of the law school; that happened later."

Weiser spoke with Law Week Colorado about his vision for CU Law. The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Question: Where are you from originally?

Answer: Outside New York City, in a town called Hastings on Hudson. My introduction to Colorado came after I graduated law school [New York University, J.D. 1994] when I clerked for Judge David Ebel on the 10th Circuit. Clerking for Judge Ebel quite literally changed my life. He introduced me to Colorado, introduced me to Justice Byron White, who I clerked with after him, and he introduced me to my wife, Heidi, a friend of his daughter.

Q: You're known for your work with the Silicon Flatirons and entrepreneurship. How will that spirit carry over into your deanship?



PHIL WEISER

A: The opportunity at the law school is to take that [Silicon Flatirons] philosophy and translate it more broadly. I believe law schools play a uniquely important role as a center of convening across the university and between the university and the worlds of business, nonprofits, civil society, legal practice and government. We are able to view the world through a unique prism that makes us an obvious choice and natural place for people to come together. Silicon Flatirons' guiding philosophy is one of engagement. I believe it serves the community, the students and the faculty

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well. That is how I will view my role as dean. Whether we're talking about environmental and natural resources issues, family law or criminal law, I believe the law school can be a very important center for convening and engagement that will enrich our community, legal community and the whole state.

Q: What role will clinics play in that strategy?

A: The opportunity that the law school has to give students real engagement and exposure through the clinics is

one of our crown jewels. In each area I just mentioned — environmental law, family law and criminal law — we have clinics. In Silicon Flatirons there are two clinics in tech policy and entrepreneurship. An important role for the clinics is something I see as central to our ability to live up to my aspirations for the law school.

Q: What are your aspirations for the law school?

A: I want us to be the best University of Colorado Law School that we can be. One mistake people sometimes make in different contexts is believing they want to be just like someone else: the next Harvard Law School, the next Stanford Law School. I don't have another law school as a model. I don't have external metrics. Instead, I have a vision for how all of us can push ourselves to be the best scholars we can be, the best teachers we can be, and the most effectively engaged in the community. That will translate a lot of ways. Student satisfaction is certainly very important, student job placement is very important, and value to the community and university at large are things I put a premium on.

Q: What's CU's greatest asset?

A: People love living in Colorado. When they come here, they really want to stay. The culture is one of cooperation and supportiveness; I have a blog where I talk about the Boulder entrepreneurial

ecosystem. My experience in Colorado is that people are rooting for other people to be the best they can be. The level of collegiality and interest in supporting others is exceptional. That type of ethic is something I will do my very best to encourage at the law school and in the community. I think that type of effort is why people are attached, succeed and don't want to leave.

Q: The economy has developed in interesting ways since you left CU. How will that affect the way you teach law?

A: It is critical when law students come to CU that they understand they have to chart their own career development. It's their mission to own their own franchise. There is no longer the opportunity for people to go to a law firm, get trained, make partner and plan on having a stable job for their career. That opportunity maybe existed 20 or 30 years ago. People now have to view themselves as franchises that they are going to be able to market. The second part of the challenge is for students not to view their careers through the narrow lens of "I can only work in a particular type of law firm." One of the challenges is to give students a broad skill set to afford them lots of opportunities. When you look around, you see lawyers doing a lot of interesting and different things. That's the sort of imagination we need to give our law students earlier, to realize the potential of their law degrees in lots of different ways. Third, they have a need in law school to develop certain skills so they can hit the ground running once they graduate. That's obviously a part of the clinical program, and part of the experiential learning program that Dean [David] Getches launched successfully and I'm excited to continue moving along.

Q: What's your most immediate challenge as dean?

A: As law school tuition has gone up and debt rates have gone higher, we have added responsibility to students to be sure we serve them well. I believe we can provide a very high-quality graduate training that will serve them well, but we need to keep these challenges in the forefront of our mind. Part of being a public law school means we need to be dedicated to providing pathways for scholarships and loan repayment, so students who want to open solo practices in rural parts of the state can afford to do that, students who want to serve in public service can do that, students who want to start their own company when they graduate can do that. If people are not earning a substantial amount, loans can be forgiven, and for those that do make a substantial amount, pay them back. That's part of what we can and need to continue to build upon so that we're not pricing people out of all sorts of careers that society values. In terms of fundraising opportunities, that's certainly going to be very high on my list. •

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