

Michigan Powerhouses: Varnum

By **Andrea Keckley**

Law360 (September 23, 2026, 4:00 PM EDT) -- Since opening its first office in Grand Rapids over 130 years ago, Varnum has shaped Michigan's legal landscape with its work on high-stakes litigation like a lawsuit seeking more than \$220 million in allegedly unpaid promissory notes from a vehicle manufacturer and lucrative deals like the acquisition of a prominent space-tech startup.

Varnum LLP started expanding outside Grand Rapids in the '80s and now has offices in Ann Arbor, Birmingham, Grand Rapids, Novi and Kalamazoo. A returning name on Law360's Michigan Powerhouses list, the firm boasts about 200 attorneys in Michigan, in addition to its team in Naples, Florida.

Firm Chair Jon Bylsma told Law360 Pulse that the firm has grown its ranks by searching organically for talent, rather than looking for someone who fits a particular practice.

"We have found that when we focus more on talent and less on the immediate short-term practice area niche need, we find people who help us build the firm that we're trying to build, which is a firm that's focused on being the best in our markets in client service and in attorney satisfaction," he said.

Varnum has deep roots in Michigan's automotive industry and has been making inroads into the world of autonomous vehicles. In 2019, the firm hired Jeff Stefan, a former General Motors Co. attorney who focused on autonomous vehicle development. Sara R. Bennett joined shortly after from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, adding her experience in rulemaking and policy initiatives related to automated driving systems. Bylsma said the firm is helping some of the largest autonomous vehicle companies navigate an evolving regulatory landscape.

One major point of pride for Varnum in its work for automotive industry clients was its victory in the lawsuit that sought more than \$220 million in allegedly unpaid promissory notes from motor vehicle manufacturing company JVIS-USA LLC. The firm prevailed in its argument that the promissory notes at issue constituted invalid LLC distributions, securing one of the largest defense verdicts in Michigan in 2025.

"In that case, we were up against [Sidley Austin LLP], one of the 10 biggest law firms in the country," executive partner Adam Brody said. "And that's similar to what we are experiencing with our [mergers and acquisitions] and corporate group, where we can show our value proposition — just as good of



lawyers, but not charging \$3,000 an hour."

Healthcare and energy are important practice areas for Varnum as well. It has one of the largest energy practices in the state, according to Bylsma, and celebrated a court victory earlier this year when a unanimous Michigan Court of Appeals panel largely affirmed the Michigan Public Service Commission's order implementing the state's landmark renewable energy siting law. A few months before that, Varnum's attorneys convinced the Michigan Court of Claims that Michigan's behavioral health services Request-For-Protocols violates the state's Mental Health Code by preventing Community Mental Health Service Programs from fulfilling their statutory duties.

Varnum's reputation extends outside the courtroom as well. It spent over a decade advising Orbion Space Technology from its earliest days as a startup through its recent acquisition by Denver-based York Space Systems. Varnum also serves as intellectual property counsel to Fans First Entertainment LLC, the owner of the viral barnstorming Georgia-based baseball team The Savannah Bananas.

"It's our litigation group, and it's our corporate group, I would say, that are the two busiest," Brody said. "But we thankfully have found ourselves very busy across the board here at the firm, and we see certain particular groups really ascending. In particular, the data privacy, mobility, and autonomous vehicle practice — that has grown to a national scale. And we continue to look to add talented individuals to that practice team because they are bringing in so many new clients and generating so much new work in the recent past."

--Additional reporting by Emma Cueto. Editing by Kristen Becker.