

New branch, new opportunities

With South Street project, Lee Bank is building more than just a bank



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Lee Bank and Allegrone team members attend a traditional "Topping Off Ceremony" to celebrate a new phase in the construction of the Pittsfield branch, located at the corners of South and Reed Streets. When completed, the building will house a full-service branch with drive-through, a community event space and four market-rate apartments on the second floor.

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Sponsored Content Editor

The long-vacant lot at the corner of South and Reed streets in downtown Pittsfield isn't looking so empty these days. Lee Bank's newest branch is still a few months out from its grand opening, but the ambitious scope of the project is already evident to anyone passing by.

The South Street location, you see, is destined for more than just banking. The two-story building will house not only a full-service branch with a drive-through window, but also a community meeting space and four much-needed market rate apartments on the second floor. It's perhaps the largest example of the city of Pittsfield's "form-based code" approach to development within what it has dubbed the Downtown Creative District — a set of regulations designed to attract more foot traffic and community activity to the area. Lee Bank has worked closely with city planners to build a facility that is as valuable to the larger community as it is to existing Bank customers.

Chuck Leach, President of Lee Bank, sat down to answer some of our questions about the ambitious project.

What were the Bank's initial reasons for opening this new Pittsfield branch, given that it already had a location within the city?

CL: We've been in Pittsfield for over a decade already, with considerable success with lending and deposit

gathering given our culture and unique approach to community banking. However, we found we've sort of outgrown our current space on North Street, and with a great opportunity to invest at the corner of South and Reed Street, we took the plunge and decided to build a new branch.

Unlike other financial institutions that seem to relentlessly pursue scale and growth in new geographies, this isn't about us getting bigger. In our minds, "bigger" isn't necessarily "better." This is about access and community engagement, which the unique design embedded in this new building will allow. We anticipate it to be more of a living, breathing organism with multiple touch points for our community, as opposed to cold, hard brick and mortar.

It goes without saying that for both retail and commercial customers, a drive-up is key and our current location has no room for that. We are very fortunate in that the city of Pittsfield welcomed us with open arms and embraced the concept of a drive-up, although that isn't necessarily a direction they wanted to go within the "Form-based Code" (more on this later).

Given our size and approach, we can't have — nor do we necessarily want — multiple locations around Pittsfield, and this South Street location was our best idea if we were to have just one location. For those that can't make it to that location, or for whom it's inconvenient for one reason or another, we

have Video Banking, which enables customers to bank freely and securely from their kitchen table with their tablet, smartphone or PC, so we're fairly confident we're covering all the bases.

Did you always intend to build from the ground up? What benefits does the new construction offer for the Bank over moving into an existing space?

CL: That's a great question, because we really did, but there's a lot of thought behind the "why." Many banks are closing branches, consolidating them, leaving them closed except for seemingly random times given staffing shortages — yet here we are, looking to relocate or open a new one.

In our minds, to do this, the design has to have something very unique in order to work. Otherwise, it's simply just another transaction-oriented space, whereas our intention is to build relationships with our customers and community. New construction offered us the opportunity to clear the decks and start with a clean slate in terms of floor plan, technology and other design elements.

It's important to stress that we view this new space more as an ecosystem. Our employees and customers will be present and interacting, but also community groups, including one set to occupy the rear acreage on the lot, as well as residential tenants upstairs. It will be pretty unique in that regard. Many banks stamp out branches like widgets on an assembly line; Our new branch will be the antithesis of that prototype.

How has the Form-based Code implemented by the city of Pittsfield impacted plans for the project?

CL: The Form-based Code is a significant part of the whole thought process. We wanted to honor the city of Pittsfield's intentions to embrace a "Downtown Creative District." This is the area where I probably get the most questions, because folks don't understand why it is such a big building. Well, given the Form-based Code, we had to go up to two floors, and given we don't necessarily need it for our staff, we decided to create apartments. That's the impetus behind the Code: commercial spaces on first floors with residences upstairs. We are more than happy to comply with the City's vision for downtown Pittsfield and hope that in some small way, it helps to meet their objectives.



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Chuck Leach, President of Lee Bank, signs the final structural beam before it is raised into place.

Many aspects of the new construction (like residential units and a community space) aren't traditionally attached to banks. How will these new, less conventional offerings blend with the Bank's existing services?

CL: We realize this all isn't necessarily conventional, but it's our belief that if a small(ish) community bank is to survive, we have to break the mold. The roots of community banking are that we service our community. Having this community engagement space, accessible outside of banking hours to our community partners, is unconventional, but it hopefully helps to strengthen our community and give something back.

The residential units upstairs won't be managed by us initially (trying to stay in our lane here!) but they will add texture, energy and "blood flow" to the space, which is essential at a time when brick and mortar, particularly in financial services, is really challenged.

It goes without saying, though, that design innovation only takes you so far, and while this might sound like a cliché, it's really the human beings and the relationships they build inside and outside that building that ultimately make a space work.

What opportunities does this new branch open up for the Bank, especially with the community-focused approach to design? What benefits do you see the new branch having to Lee Bank customers, and to the community as a whole?

CL: We hear over and over again that consumers want other choices in Pittsfield, both on the business side of the house and consumer banking. Frankly, with a difficult to access branch we weren't really set up to welcome these customers in the past, but we are hopeful that

the new location will help as there is certainly less "friction" getting in and out.

In addition, the space is meant to feel much more welcoming to traditionally underbanked or overlooked populations; bilingual employees will be available by appointment either in-branch or via video banking, so overall we see an opportunity to welcome and grow this customer base where they are clearly looking for alternatives and options in the market. With a lot of work this past summer and fall by my team and me personally, this was communicated to us very directly. This has us feeling very optimistic about how this branch will function.

The community space is set up so that groups can use it outside of banking hours, with technology that will enable the branch to be sealed off, and access provided to groups looking for a meeting or engagement space. It's looking like a high impact community organization will also help us develop and maintain the rear of the parcel, which will then serve as a small green and teaching space in the middle of the city. We're pretty excited about this feature, as are many in our network.

For updates on the new South Street location, as well as information on Lee Bank's existing branches and available services, visit leebank.com.

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Team members meet on-site to review designs as the branch takes shape.