

BANKING & finance

MAIN STREET MAKEOVER

Community input guides Lee Bank branch renovation

BY BRAD JOHNSON

Some 18 years after opening its full-service branch office in downtown Great Barrington, Lee Bank has completed a major renovation of the facility that, officials say, brings it more in line with the needs of its customers and the community at large.

"We're a stakeholder on Main Street," said Brandy McKie, vice president of retail banking at Lee Bank. "We wanted this to resonate in a positive way in the community and to make sure it's aligned with our customers and the community."

The project also took shape at a time when many industry observers raise questions about the future of the brick-and-mortar banking model.

"There are so many conversations happening about whether there's an 'Uber moment' coming for the financial services industry," said Chuck Leach, president of Lee Bank, referring to the impact the now ubiquitous online ridesharing service had on conventional transportation services.

For the banking industry, Leach said, there have been predictions that online access to financial services will greatly reduce – if not eliminate – the need for physical branch locations. "From that perspective, it calls into question why we would invest in this branch at this time," he said.

The answer, he added, is that such predictions thus far have been off the mark. "Data shows that people still enjoy the branch experience," Leach said, noting that this plays out across a range of demographic sectors.

"For example, a lot of people thought millennials would never use [branch locations]



The newly remodeled Great Barrington office of Lee Bank features a more accessible teller line and other improvements designed to provide a more welcoming and engaging experience for customers.

for their banking," he said. "But that's not at all what we've been seeing. There are a lot of people in that age group who look for and appreciate the personal engagement as part of their banking experience."

Whether that situation holds true across the broader banking industry is another matter, said Leach, noting that many larger institutions emphasize online access to their services as more convenient for customers and less costly for the bank itself.

But, for Lee Bank, he added, the fact that in-person banking continues to be popular with customers – from millennials to seniors – reflects well on its own brand and business model. "Our emphasis is on relationship banking," he said. "We view every contact and interaction as an opportunity to better serve the needs of our customers."

Supporting that "relationship banking" business model became the overarching

goal for the redesign of the Great Barrington branch office.

"We felt we needed to make our branch more relevant and up-to-date," said Leach. He pointed out that – unlike its other branch offices in Stockbridge, Lenox and downtown Pittsfield – Lee Bank owns the space it occupies in Great Barrington as a commercial condominium.

Focus group feedback

McKie, who until recently served as manager of the Great Barrington branch, noted that the project initially began on a less ambitious level. "In the summer of 2016 we began thinking about doing some cosmetic stuff," she said, adding that they lined up a design consultant, Image 4, to assist with that.

Over the following year the bank also held a series of focus group sessions to get input from a range of constituencies – including various categories of customers, as well as non-customer community members.

The information gained from these focus groups pointed to several issues that required more than just cosmetic touch-ups to address. High among them was the branch's overall configuration and use of space.

"The primary feedback from customers was that they wanted a space where they could engage more readily with our staff," said Leach.

The key factor here was that the existing teller line was positioned to the rear of the space, which created an environment that some customers found less than welcoming.

"One of the takeaways from our focus groups was that people wanted to feel welcomed and acknowledged," said McKie. "Having the teller line so far from the main entrance definitely worked against that."

"There was a lot of dead space that we needed to use better," added Alison Brigham, marketing manager for Lee Bank. She explained that, in addition to the distant teller line, the configuration of offices and common areas also worked against the goal of better customer engagement.

Addressing these issues became a priority for the project. "We decided that if we're going to do a major renovation, let's make sure it makes sense and is done right," said McKie.

The bank recruited Allegrone Construction to work with designs created by Image 4 that would bring the teller line much further to the front, along with other objectives stemming from the focus group sessions.

Among those goals was creation of a conference room for use by the bank as well as community groups. "This office never had a meeting space, and that was something that we wanted to add as part of this project," said Brigham. "A lot of nonprofits that we work with don't have a space like this, so we wanted to make one available to them here."

Renovation logistics

Achieving these and other goals, however, meant grappling with some existing structural barriers and limitations within the space.

It also meant that the bank faced the choice of either closing the office during construction or asking for a good measure of patience from customers in dealing with inconveniences of keeping the branch open while work was being done.

"When we got down to the nitty gritty of construction, we wanted to keep the branch open," said McKie. "That meant we had to work on half of the branch at a time."

Work on the front half of the space began in January. This necessitated that customers use an alternate entrance to the rear of the building to access the teller line. "We kept all our basic infrastructure in place," said McKie. "But we moved our mortgage originator and commercial lender to office space that we were able to lease above Tom's Toys just a few steps down Main Street."

The front half of the project was completed at the end of June, and the branch's limited operations transitioned to that space over the next few weeks to allow work to begin on the back half.

"The second part went relatively quickly," said McKie, noting that it was completed in mid-September, after which the branch resumed full operations.

"The feedback from customers has been fantastic," said McKie. "So many people think we expanded, but we didn't. It just feels that way with the higher ceilings, spaciousness and glass-enclosed offices."

Brigham added that customer response has validated the goal of creating a more welcoming environment. "They feel special when they walk in," she said.

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Brandy McKie, vice president of retail banking (left), and Alison Brigham, marketing manager, point out that the branch renovation project also allowed for the addition of what they refer to as a “shared meeting space” for use by the bank as well as community groups. “A lot of nonprofits that we work with don’t have a space like this, so we wanted to make one available to them here,” Brigham notes.

In addition to the spaciousness and far-forward teller line, she noted that customers have also commented on some of the more subtle touches that arose from focus group sessions. These include such “natural” elements as load-bearing columns designed to resemble tree trunks, and carpeting with a “dappled forest floor” design that suggests the shadows of leaves from the “tree canopy” above.

“We really paid attention to the details, and it’s nice to see that it really works the way we need for our customers,” Brigham said.

Leach agreed, noting that project succeeds in supporting the relationship banking model. “We took a lot of time and got input from the public,” said Leach. “They told us, ‘It’s all about the people,’ and this allows us to put a spotlight on the people even more.”

Lee Bank will showcase its newly renovated branch when it hosts a Business After Hours event of the Southern Berkshire Chamber of Commerce on Nov. 14 from 5 to 7 p.m. (The event is open to members of the chamber and invited guests only.)◆

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