

'FIRST' AND FOREMOST

First Federal Savings Bank Making Big Impact

By Matt Ottinger

Rochester-based First Federal Savings Bank is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year – and it's come a long way.

The bank was launched in the back of a grocery store in 1966 when founder Dick Belcher learned home mortgage loans for locals were coming from institutions outside of the area. Belcher's legacy continues to thrive, and he would serve as CEO until his death in 2022.

Current president and CEO Evan Gottschalk, who's been with the bank since 2008, reflects on the institution's founding.

"There weren't really any Fulton County institutions making home loans," he says. "So, there was a real opportunity to serve the local folks here with home lending. That was kind of the impetus to get started and organized."

He estimates the bank now serves about 50,000 households, with a physical presence most visible in northern Indiana counties like Elkhart, Fulton, Marshall, Pulaski and St. Joseph.

A niche in home lending remains a point of emphasis.

"We do home lending all over," Gottschalk notes. "We've got a bunch in northern Michigan. We kind of consider our lending area Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois and Florida because we have a lot of people that go down (to the Sunshine State) and purchase second homes or moved down there later in life and would still like us to handle their mortgage."

A friend to enterprise

Serving the business community has become a focus for the bank as well.

"We didn't used to have much of a business banking setup, and we did do a lot of deposit accounts for our nonprofits in our communities and churches," Gottschalk relays. "Those were a good match for us as we were focusing on home lending and retail."

"But in 2017, we started offering business lending and also business deposit

accounts in a more real way for our small business customers and our communities primarily," he adds. "We've really been building on that over the years, adding the online products and services that go along with that."

First Federal now has \$650 million in assets, Gottschalk informs, which includes \$120 million in commercial small business loans.

Planning partner

Since its founding, the bank has grown in other areas, including helping its customers make future-focused decisions.

"We now have advisory bank employees that are helping our customers with the long-term financial planning, so we've got that piece of it covered as well," Gottschalk shares. "We added that, I think, in the late 1980s."

The bank also now has a variety of insurance offerings and a bank-owned insurance agency, which ties into the bigger picture.

"Our main philosophy is we want to be the bank that's helping our customers from start to finish with home lending, so that's still the backbone," Gottschalk imparts.

He contrasts that mentality with that of other entities.



First Federal Savings Bank makes engagement with its communities a priority in various ways. In fact, its Rochester Community Appreciation Day attracts over 700 people annually.



“At a lot of places, they make a home loan to you and then they sell the servicing rights to another company that sends you statements – and you send your payments to them, and they handle your escrow, but it can be sold several times,” Gottschalk explains. “You’re actually dealing with a different entity than who made the loan for you. The loan officer that made the loan to you can’t help you with anything anymore because they’ve sold the rights to that.”

Community backer

First Federal’s focus on community members is not just via its business practices and offerings.

One comprehensive example is via its Community Fund through the Northern Indiana Community Foundation (NICF), which serves Fulton, Miami and Starke counties.

“(Belcher) was really instrumental in getting the (NICF) started in the early 1990s when the Lilly Endowment created that opportunity,” Gottschalk shares. “First Federal donated money to the NICF to start the First Federal Savings Bank Donor Advised

Fund that we use to support charitable nonprofits in our community.”

Family and friends

Internally, the bank takes a “family-first” approach to its staff, allowing flexibility to prioritize needs at home.

“Everybody pitches in to help somebody that may need to have some flexibility with a schedule or a situation or an emergency,” Gottschalk elaborates. “(Our) ‘family first’ means that, but it also means we consider our employees family members in terms of how we want to be approaching them, seeing them, treating them, working together, teamwork and working through situations.”

It’s that mantra of personal touch that carries over to external initiatives as well, whether it’s having a familiar person at the bank or impacting activities in the area.

“We have a trust built with (customers) from being a community bank, so not only are we their neighbors working here, we also are supporting things in the community that they’re enjoying and appreciating, like something at the schools for their kids,”

Gottschalk says.

Getting engaged in financial literacy in local schools is also a focus, as well as financial wellness for adults.

“We host the Leadership Academy here when that’s in session, so that’s a big part of it, too,” Gottschalk states. “We want to help our community thrive and grow in wealth and vitality and contentment and satisfaction and amenities. And for that, it just takes a lot of group effort on all the ways you need to be planning, preparing and good decision making.”

He also points to engagement with parks, health and wellness activities, or sponsoring and donating to nonprofits and helping people in need as priorities.

“(Customers see) all of those things and appreciate the bank’s dedication to the local community where our branches are, and those are things that are making life better in that community for them,” Gottschalk offers.

All told, perhaps the bank is best summed up by a quote attributed to Belcher on its website: “We don’t want to be the biggest bank, just the best.”

RESOURCE: Evan Gottschalk, First Federal Savings Bank, at www.firstfederalbanking.com

We speak fluent event planner.

FOR PLANNERS:

- » Full in-house sales & event management, AV technology, F&B & complimentary hosts & WiFi
- » 225,000 sf of beautifully appointed space
- » 18 versatile, fully equipped spaces
- » Intuitive floor plans
- » 4500 theater; 3100 banquet; 2900 classroom
- » 4 downtown full service hotels; garage parking
- » **Award winning service**
- » Nearly **80% rebooking rate**
- » **SAVE UP TO 15%** vs. comparable cities!

FOR ATTENDEES:

- » Walkable, safe, enjoyable downtown
- » 60+ walk-to restaurants, pubs, coffee & dessert houses
- » Boutique shopping
- » Live entertainment
- » Vibrant arts & attractions
- » Riverfront parks, trails & activities for all abilities
- » Easy Midwest drive-to destination
- » Easy by air via FWA

Plan confidently...
Talk with **Marcy McKinley**, Director of Sales

GWCC GRAND WAYNE CONVENTION CENTER
Beyond convention. Beyond expectation.™

OPEN DOORS. OPEN ARMS. OPEN FOR BUSINESS.
You Are Welcome Here.

Fort Wayne INDIANA
See you when you get here!

IT'S ALL HAPPENING IN DOWNTOWN FORT WAYNE, INDIANA
grandwayne.com | 260.426.4100 | FWA