

# Turning over a new leaf

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KALAMAZOO – In 10 years, **Greenleaf Trust** has experienced remarkable growth, so much, in fact, that the locally owned bank had to move to a new home.

The Michigan-chartered bank specializing in wealth management, trust administration and employee benefit plans, recently moved into the newly renovated 44,000-square-foot former YWCA on South Rose Street in downtown Kalamazoo.

After just one decade, the company manages \$7.7 billion in assets and handles 660 account relationships and nearly 7,000 employee retirement funds. In 2007, the bank marked its ninth consecutive year of more than 30 percent growth in an industry that has grown just 6 percent. The bank has branched out from its Kalamazoo roots to service the Holland, Traverse City, Petoskey and Birmingham, Mich. markets. Greenleaf's assets have doubled, on average, every 3.8 years.

According to Bill Johnston, chairman and president of Greenleaf Trust, the bank entered a market that was devoid of trust banking and wealth management services due to several major consolidations in which local banks became controlled by regional management.

"We saw an opportunity to develop a Michigan-chartered bank that would

focus specifically on wealth management, trust banking and fiduciary services," Johnston told *MiBiz*.

Besides the good talent Greenleaf employs, Johnston said the bank has succeeded because it can focus entirely on its customers. Unlike many banks, Greenleaf does not offer proprietary products, therefore removing that "conflict of interest" and allowing the employees to service the customer first and foremost.

"We focus on the service, not the proprietary products," he said. "We have a universe of investment tools to use, and we're on the same side of the desk as the clients."

Working in a team environment, the clientele also gets the benefit of the entire staff's collective knowledge, a process that also allows the bank to improve from the bottom up.

Greenleaf prides itself on its "honest and honorable" culture, a feature Johnston said has contributed to its clients' high levels of satisfaction.

Because of the continued growth of the company, Greenleaf was quickly outgrowing its former location in the Radisson Plaza Hotel and Suites, and its commercial real

estate company, Catalyst Development Co. LLC, purchased the 1920s-era YWCA building three years ago. Since then, it has been working on the design of the facility. Construction took place in the last nine months of 2007. Architects **Eckert-Wordell**, construction management company **CSM Group**,

interior design artist **Cindi Berge** and lighting specialist **Gary Steffy** worked on the project.

The interior's rosewood decor is inspired by 1940s art deco and features black lacquer finishes and stainless steel details. The site also has room for Greenleaf to grow; Johnston expects to add four to five people per year to his 50-person team.

According to Johnston, Greenleaf's "single largest challenge" has been to find talent that fits with the bank's culture. The company is focused on finding people who not only like and are passionate about what they do, but who also are the best in their fields. Employees' strengths and passions must align with the company for the model to work.

"We must continue to build our workplace culture," Johnston said.

Greenleaf sees growth opportunities in Southeast Michigan where there's a "large population base that needs our services," Johnston said. With the changes to LaSalle Bank and the relocation of Comerica's headquarters out of the Detroit area, Johnston hopes to bolster Greenleaf's presence in that corner of the state.

"It certainly presents options to us," he said. "We're very well received in Southeast Michigan."

Their low trust officer-to-client ratios – 60-to-one compared to 200-to-one for national banks – will be a benefit as the bank continues to grow in that area, according to Johnston. Those low ratios allow the officer to more intimately know the client and be able to react more meaningfully to his or her needs. **MiBiz**



**Johnston**