

Private Bank bucks trend amid economic woes

By Doug DeLoach
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Since 2008, there have been more than 200 bank failures throughout the country, including 37 in Georgia — which currently leads the nation.

While the Peach State has faced its share of banking troubles in recent years, a few success stories have risen from an otherwise gloomy landscape.

One of them is **Private Bank of Buckhead**, which was founded in December 2006 by Chairman and CEO Charlie Crawford Jr.

"We opened with a plan based on three overriding objectives," Crawford said. "We certainly needed to grow the bank to cover our infrastructure, but we also kept our focus on quality and profitability in every step we took."

More than a few banks starting around the same time failed to achieve a similar balance.

"A lot of banks pushed the growth button, but neglected to push the other two," Crawford said.

In the fall of 2005, after working for many years at banking institutions both large and small, Crawford decided to transform a professional dream into a reality.

"I wanted a clean piece of paper on which to draw what I thought would be the ideal community bank," he said.

After gathering together a small group of industry veterans and backers who shared his vision, Crawford spent the next 14 months going through the charter application and approval process — identifying the location and technology, hiring people and raising capital.

Beginning with a staff of nine "relationship managers" and a 12-member board, Crawford has since steered Private Bank to the point where 21 employees are striving toward a projected 47 percent revenue growth in 2010.

"Charlie has a keen understanding of what he wants to accomplish," said Christopher Marinac, managing principal at **FIG Partners LLC**. "He didn't try to grow too fast, he wasn't trying to specialize and he didn't focus too much on real estate construction or development."

Having Lady Luck on your side also helps.

"I did not foresee the banking or economic climate that we would be operating in for the first three or four years, but our timing and other circumstances turned out to be in our favor," Crawford said.

Because he was opening a relatively small community bank in Buckhead, in an already congested part of Atlanta, Crawford said his game plan never included expanding operations with a lot of residential development and construction lending.

"We didn't hire a construction lender or a real estate expert," he said. "Naturally, we have real estate as collateral on many of our loans, but, philosophically speaking, we lend money to people, not projects or assets."

According to Marinac, almost none of the banks launched in Georgia during the last several years were well-positioned to weather the economic storm bearing down on the industry.

"Charlie was wise enough to recognize that there were false pretenses underlying a lot of community banks," he said.

A 25-year veteran of the banking industry, Crawford's career began in New York with Bankers Trust Company. After coming to Atlanta in 1986, he joined



JOANN VITELLI

Keeping focus: Private Bank of Buckhead CEO Charlie Crawford is optimistic about the institution's continued growth.

CHARLES CRAWFORD JR.

Title: Chairman and CEO,
Private Bank of Buckhead

Education: Bachelor's degree in business from the University of Pennsylvania and The Wharton School of Business; MBA at Georgia State University; Louisiana State University School of Banking; and Leadership Atlanta (Class of 2005).

Civic activities include: Director of the Buckhead Coalition and serves on board of the city of Atlanta Board of Ethics. Trustee of the Atlanta History Center. Past president of The Rotary Club of Buckhead.

Bank South, where he held a variety of management positions.

In 1996, Crawford started The Buckhead Bank as a division of Milton National Bank. When the bank was sold, a non-compete kept Crawford off the scene until 2001, when he started Riverside Bank of Buckhead.

A few years later, when Riverside was acquired by **Synovus Financial Corp.**, Crawford made the commitment to launch his ideal community bank.

"In banking, the products, technology — all of that is a known commodity," Crawford said. "I really believe the only difference between our bank and other community banks is the people."

Initially, the majority of Private Bank's customer base came with the territory or, rather, with the "relationship managers."

"We hired experienced, seasoned bankers who have been in the Atlanta market a long time," Crawford said. "At our end of the market, the client tends to bank with the banker, rather than the institution."

"Smaller, community banks compete for customers from the 'Big Bank' world," he said. "They're seeking that person who, for whatever reason, has become frustrated with the level of service and attention they've been receiving."

Analysts predict that the banking industry woes in Georgia will not be abating anytime soon. In the first quarter of 2010, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. recorded seven bank failures statewide, and more are expected.

Given present conditions, Private Bank will likely not be among that number. Crawford said he is confident about expanding his client base, deposits and loan portfolio in 2010 and beyond.

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Charlie Crawford's
Private Bank of
Buckhead has found
success in a down market.

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