

Community Banks Take Precautions, Survive with Drive-Thrus and Digital Banking

By John Carroll

They check your temperature at the door at the Bank of Eastman in south-central Georgia.

Unusual times calls for unusual procedures at the community bank. The coronavirus has landed in Dodge County, population 20,730, and bank CEO Jolene Carroll has rolled out her pandemic plan.

Gloves adorn employees who handle cash. Furniture, chairs and tabletops are cleaned and sanitized. Tellers wear face shields and surgical hairnets when counting money in the bank vault.

“We started planning weeks ago,” says Carroll. “We are prepared and open for business. All of our drive-thrus are operational and fully staffed. We have four ATMs, internet banking and mobile banking. Technology enables us to interact with customers through multiple channels.”

Due to the coronavirus health crisis, customers are allowed in the lobby of the bank by appointment only. And then they must pass the temperature test at the door with a special thermometer administered by a banker dressed in medical garb. Register 100.3 or higher and you’re not allowed in.

Financial Lifeline

Established in 1909, the Bank of Eastman survived the Depression and stayed solvent through the 2008 financial crisis. It will survive the coronavirus too, says Carroll.

The bank operates four other branches in Gray and Milledgeville, Ga., under the Magnolia State Bank name. With \$160 million in assets, the bank serves consumer and commercial customers in the local communities. For many people and businesses, the bank is the lifeline for money, mortgages, loans and other banking services.

Nationwide, community banks comprise more than 52,000 locations and hold more than \$5 trillion in assets. Combined in total deposits, they are nearly as big as the megabanks. They are the backbone of the economy, says Carroll.

But thousands of job losses in the hospitality industry and the growing number of deaths in the country from the outbreak around the world have spooked many Americans. Cities like San Francisco, New York and Atlanta have become virtual ghost towns as people are told to stay home and work remote.

Meanwhile, churches have temporarily canceled services, children are being homeschooled, professional sports is on hold, and restaurants have closed dining-in services and offer takeout only.

“The first thing to remember is to stay calm,” says Carroll. “There’s no need to panic. The economy will keep going on. This will pass.”

Passing Out Pandemic Kits

Jessica Keller, chief IT officer, at People’s Bank of Georgia in Talbotton, Ga., said this is the first time in the history of the 1890-established community bank that it has had to deploy its pandemic plan.

Part of the plan includes dividing bank employees into two teams that work separate schedules from each other. This minimizes the spread of infection and protects employees and customers. “If somebody gets the virus then only one group is exposed,” says Keller.

The bank officer created pandemic kits for each employee of the bank. The kits consist of Lysol spray cans, disinfectant wipes, latex gloves and face masks.

Keller remembers the financial crisis of 2008, but said dealing with a pandemic is very different.

“I don’t think it’s like the financial bubble. It’s not comparable,” she said. “That was self-inflicted. This is like a natural disaster. It impacts everybody including bankers. We’re trying to keep our customers calm and not increase the panic.”

COVID 19 is causing banks to take protective measures and emphasize digital banking services for customers. The uncertainty in the air presents a great time for consumers to lean on internet banking, contactless payments, mobile banking, and video teller machines. These tools mitigate physical contact with people but still allow customers to do their banking in an efficient and convenient manner.

Back in Eastman, Carroll also is encouraging customers to use their debit and credit cards whenever possible instead of cash. “Cards are cleaner,” she said.