

New local bank in the works for Southwest Florida, the first in more than a decade

Laura Layden Fort Myers [NewsPress](#)
[Naples Daily News](#)

William Blevins is no stranger to banking. His career in banking spans more than three decades in Southwest Florida — and he's not done yet. In fact, Blevins is behind an effort to start a newly chartered community bank, with a headquarters in Fort Myers, that would cater to local businesses, making most of its revenue on commercial loans and lines of credit. "It's going to be a business-focused bank, but we will take care of the residential needs of our clients," he said.

The chosen name is telling of the mission: Gulf Coast Business Bank. Blevins, the lead organizer, will serve as the bank's president and CEO. A new community bank, he said, hasn't been started in Lee or Collier counties in more than 12 years. It will be a first for Blevins.



There are 16 organizers behind Gulf Coast Business Bank, 10 of whom have agreed to serve as founding directors on its board to help get it off on the right foot. The directors have extensive business experience in various industries, from tires to real estate development. A little over half of them have served on bank boards in the past, or have banking experience, which is important, Blevins said, especially when launching — and seeking regulatory approval for — a new, or de novo, financial institution.

The approval process is rigorous, involving serious scrutiny by regulatory examiners.

A different philosophy

In selecting the new bank's board, Blevins used this thought process:

"I know I'll never be the smartest person in the room, but I'll surround myself with people who are," he said. "That is a different philosophy than some previous management that I've worked with." Over the next few months, he hopes to add a few more board members. "We would love to have some more folks from the Collier County market," Blevins said.

As for the bank itself, the chosen operational approach takes a cue from the book "The Dream Manager," which promotes the idea that "a company can only become the-best-version-of-itself to the extent that its employees are becoming better versions of themselves."

"My philosophy is if I take care of my colleagues' dreams and goals, they'll take care of our clients' dreams and goals — and in the end take care of our shareholders," Blevins said.

His favorite motivational quotes come from former U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt and former British statesman Winston Churchill. One of his favorite quotes from Churchill? "We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give." In his quest to start a bank, Blevins said he feels a bit like the "man in the arena" referenced in this famous quote by Roosevelt: **"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena..."** Initially, the bank will have 14 to 16 employees. The organizers will look to hire the most experienced bankers with strong community bank backgrounds in Southwest Florida.

Dreams and goals

Every employee will get "The Dream Book" by sales strategist Billy Cox, encouraging them to start jotting down their dreams and goals, so they can develop an action plan to "make them happen," Blevins said. The operating strategy will focus on maintaining low overhead, while using the latest technology, allowing the bank to streamline the clients' financial needs.

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A minimum investment of \$10,000 will be required, while the maximum will be set at \$1 million, to keep private equity groups or a single investor from securing a major stake in the bank, Blevins said. Private equity groups often demand their money back within five to seven years, forcing a sale, and Blevins wants the bank to have staying power.

“The board and organizers do not want to build a bank, then turn around and flip it,” he said. Most of the investors in the bank are expected to be local, from Lee or Collier counties. Local investors have already made commitments of \$14.5 million, which includes more than \$3 million from the bank’s organizers, Blevins said.

An investment bank advisory company, Donnelly Penman & Partners, has been tapped to help raise the rest of the money required before the bank can open. Shares will initially trade for \$10. They’re expected to lose value before gaining any, due to anticipated losses of \$2 million the first year and \$1 million the second year, which is typical for a start-up bank, Blevins said.

By the third year, he foresees the bank operating in the black, making about \$1.25 million. The financial institution will be listed on the “pink sheets,” which means its shares will trade on the Over-the-Counter Bulletin Board, rather than on a major stock exchange, through a broker-dealer network.

Substantially complete

The application for a state charter has been deemed “substantially complete” by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp., or FDIC, with approval from state and federal regulators expected to come this month, subject to raising the required capital, which should be accomplished by December, Blevins said.

He anticipates the bank will open in February. Its main offices at the corner of Metro Parkway and Crystal Drive have already been purchased. In three to four years, there are plans to add a location in the Naples area, to better serve clients in Collier County.

While Southwest Florida is one of the fastest-growing regions in the country, its businesses are underserved when it comes to relationship-based community banking, Blevins said, due to consolidation that has shifted more deposits to large national banks over the past 15 years through mergers and acquisitions. The new bank, he said, will help fill that void.

Since 2005, the number of locally-based banks in Lee has shrunk from about a dozen to three. Sanibel Captiva Community Bank, FineMark National Bank & Trust, and Edison National Bank.

Meanwhile, in Collier County, there’s just one local bank left, First Florida Integrity, which is headed for a sale to out-of-state owners.

Filling a need

COVID highlighted the need for another community bank, geared toward local businesses, Blevins said, as many smaller companies struggled to stay afloat early on in the pandemic after it crushed the local economy, triggering the need for emergency grants and loans — especially for those most affected by temporary government shutdowns.

“They didn’t have a 90-day rainy day fund,” he said. “You know, it was pretty devastating. Luckily, Florida had the wisdom to open up quicker. It definitely helped our economy not go down as much.” The targeted client would have \$1 million to \$10 million in annual sales, Blevins said.

The bank’s offerings would include financing for owner-occupied real estate, income property and equipment, as well as lines of credit to be used as needed — and loans backed by the Small Business Administration, which could be tapped for most business purposes, including working capital.

While there’s competition in the marketplace, Blevins said he isn’t too worried about it, seeing it more as friendly than fierce. Indeed, he plans to work cooperatively with other community banks as a co-lender to fund larger loans.

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Experience and know-how

Blevins last worked for the Lake Michigan Credit Union, where he served as an executive vice president, a Lee County market executive, and a senior commercial lender for a decade. He left in March, to focus on starting the new bank. He has 20 years of local experience as a loan officer, which includes working for other big-name banks, such as Wells Fargo and Bank of America. He was part of the senior management team that successfully built and sold Encore Bank, a private boutique bank headquartered in Naples, formed through a merger with First National Bank of Southwest Florida.

In 2018, the Lake Michigan Credit Union absorbed Encore. Blevins worked for the credit union under a no-compete agreement for three years before resigning to pursue his dreams of starting a new bank. Guy Paparella, a real estate developer and equipment leasing operator, has been chosen as the bank's board chairman.

He said his involvement and investment in the new bank reflects his faith in Blevins, who he's known for about 35 years as a hard-working, successful banker. He said Blevins isn't just knowledgeable about banking, he's extremely passionate about it. "I believe that our focus on businesses, on this part of the marketplace, is a huge advantage for us," Paparella said. "I think that part of the marketplace is underserved and there is a need for another community bank that will do that."

A Positive Trend

Alex Sanchez, president and CEO of the Florida Bankers Association, said it's great to see more local banks forming in the state because they're sorely needed. Since 2019, there's been a noticeable increase in new community bank applications.

"Community banks provide 50% of small business loans in our country," Sanchez said. "So they play a major role in our economy, in our entrepreneurial society, by providing the capital for these small businesses." As for the new Gulf Coast Business Bank, Sanchez feels confident it will succeed, with Blevins at the helm.

“I’m really, really happy that this is happening,” he said. “I think it will do a great job for the community.”



Alex Sanchez
Florida Bankers Association

Donald Musso, founder of FinPro Inc. and a nationally known thought leader in community banking, said while federal regulators have encouraged the formation of more banks, today’s higher capital requirements aren’t easy to meet — at more than \$20 million, almost double what they were before the Great Recession.

In the aftermath of the financial crisis and Great Recession, new charters fell to zero and only started to recover in 2019, according to an FDIC study.

A resurgence is happening in such states as Florida and Texas, which are seeing an influx of new residents in part due to their lower taxes — and have bounced back more quickly from the economic blow dealt by the pandemic, Musso said.

New charters that can meet the more stringent capital requirements, he said, are getting approved — and opening their doors — fairly quickly.

“What’s interesting is we’ve had probably a 50% fall-out ratio of banks that have made de novo applications, but haven’t opened their doors, because they can’t raise the capital required,” Musso said.

PUSH FOR NEW BANKS

Here’s a look at applications for new banks in Florida since early 2019, along with their current status:

Gulf Atlantic Bank in Key West — Application Date: 3/1/2019. Approved: 2/19/2021. Opened: 4/13/2021.

Climate First Bank in St. Petersburg — Application Date: 10/2/2020. Approved: 3/1/2021. Opened: 6/1/2021.

OUR Community Bank in Hialeah — Application Date: 10/19/2019. Approved: 3/17/2021. Opening pending.

Waterfall Bank in Clearwater — Application Date: 12/11/2020, Approved: 8/6/2021. Opening pending.

Multi-Bank in Fort Lauderdale — Application Date: 10/2/2020. Approval pending.

Locality Bank in Fort Lauderdale — Application Date: 3/18/2021. Approval pending.

Gulf Coast Business Bank in Fort Myers – Application Date: 6/1/2021. Approval pending.

Source: [Florida Office of Financial Regulation](#)

THE ORGANIZERS

Here are the organizers behind Gulf Coast Business Bank:

Sandy Stilwell Youngquist, restaurant operator

Guy Paparella, equipment leasing operator and real estate developer

Tom Taylor, principal of Hole Montes, an engineering firm

Jim Humphrey, attorney and former mayor of Fort Myers

Rick Johnson, tire store developer

Gordon Fay, owner of Seminole Gulf Railroad

William Blevins, long-time banker and lead organizer

Al and Pat O’Donnell, owners of O’Donnell Landscapes

Gerard McHale, accountant and bankruptcy trustee

Rick Knight, former president/owner of Coastal Building Materials

Vinnie Nardi, real estate investor, and owner of an equipment sales and rental

business

Tom Kiddy, former owner of Pelican Supply

Gary Griffin, president of B&I Contractors

Anthony Leon, owner of a construction equipment sales and rental business

Russell Budd, president of PBS/Wall Systems

Bill Price, an owner of Seagate Development