

Small-town banker leads American Bankers Association

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Matt Williams takes over as chairman

Leading a group that represents 95% of the U.S. banking industry's \$14 trillion in assets may seem daunting.

Matt Williams will tell you that the responsibility sometimes leaves him weak kneed.

But the 63-year-old Gothenburg native kept his nerves in check on Oct. 16 when he strolled on stage to become chairman of the American Bankers Association during a convention in San Diego, CA, last week.

As ABA vice chairman and chairman elect the past two years, Williams has traveled to various state conventions and testified about banking issues on Capitol Hill.

The ante will be upped this year as the president of Gothenburg State Bank will try to visit 25 more conventions scattered across the nation and spend even more time in Washington D.C.

He and his wife, Sue, will also travel to Shanghai, China, for an international monetary conference.

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“I keep my suitcase packed and know a good dry cleaner,” Williams quipped.

On a more serious note, he said one of the biggest challenges facing U.S. banks is the struggling economy on a national and international level.

And what Williams describes as the piling on of regulations ever since the 2008 financial meltdown.



“We need safe and sound banking regulations and fair examination of banks but additional red tape is more burdensome on smaller banks,” he said.

For example, Williams said proposed rules regulating how capital is calculated and reported will force banks to hold higher levels of capital and restrain their ability to make additional loans.

“And we want to create an environment that allows banks to continue serving customers,” he said.

Unlike larger banks, Williams said small, community banks like GSB don't have legal departments or full-time compliance officers because of the cost.

Instead, the bank relies on the ABA for legal matters and hires consultants for compliance matters.

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“It can’t be a one size fits all,” Williams said about regulations on banks, noting that’s what the ABA wants Capitol Hill legislators to hear. “Bankers need to tell their stories about how regulations affect them.”

Williams and others in the ABA want to ensure that bankers stay engaged in the industry by writing letters and contacting legislators.

“Legislators expect the ABA to react negatively to additional regulations,” he said. “They need to hear from bankers about how the proposed regulations affect their ability to serve customers.”

Another challenge is recruiting the best and brightest young people to the banking industry.

“If we attract and retain them, we can expect to prosper,” Williams said.

From his involvement in the ABA, the banker said he has a better perspective of banks of all sizes.

Small banks loan businesses money but it takes a large bank to handle the needs of large industries like pharmaceuticals, Williams said.

Large banks are also needed to compete globally, he noted, pointing to the fact that only five banks of the world’s 50 largest are in the United States.

Williams continues to recognize the importance of the people in his life such as the team at GSB which he described as tremendous.

“Because of it, I can represent banks across the country,” he said. “There’s very little any one can accomplish by him- or herself.”

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Growing up in Gothenburg gave Williams an opportunity to participate in a wide range of activities—from sports to music to academics to church.

“They all framed my thought process and helped me recognize that it doesn’t really matter where you are from,” he explained. “In our country, you have opportunities that don’t limit what you are capable of doing.”

While crisscrossing the sky this year to meet fellow bankers, legislators and others, Williams will remember his roots and what he’s learned so far.

“Humility and staying grounded.”

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