

AMERICAN BANKER

On Focus and In Depth

ON MAIN STREET

Think, Act Locally

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By Katie Kuehner-Hebert

Jim Shafer sees Tremont, Ill., as a perfect bedroom community and he is doing his part to keep it that way.

Last year Mr. Shafer, the chief executive of the \$115 million-asset First National Bank in Tremont, spearheaded a series of workshops with local business and political leaders to map out a development plan for the village of about 2,000 residents. The goal was to ensure that people who work for large regional employers, such as Caterpillar Inc. in Peoria and State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co. in Bloomington, continue to find Tremont to be a desirable place to live.

"We are already a vibrant community, but you need to build on that, just to stay ahead of the curve," Mr. Shafer said.

James T. Dittoe, an economic development consultant and the author of the workbook, "90 Days to a Winning Community," helped Mr. Shafer conduct the workshops. He says bankers often take the lead on community development issues and are among the the most active participants in his workshops. "They have the financial wherewithal to make the investments for community development, and their bottom lines are very dependent on how well their community grows."

Tremont's main selling point is its top-notch school system, which goes a long way toward bringing in residents, Mr. Shafer said.

Still, he said, the community cannot stand pat. Projects in the works include a new residential subdivision, and the village is conducting a fund-raising campaign to improve the amenities of a park.

Mr. Dittoe said he has worked with many Rust Belt cities whose populations have dwindled as manufacturers have moved plants to other regions or even other countries. In addition to facilitating the workshops, he helps participants apply for grants from governmental agencies or nonprofits to finance initiatives.

To make sure communities follow through on their plans, participants sign a "Declaration of Commitment."

In Tremont, the commitment is "to continue to grow and remain viable," Mr. Shafer said. "But we don't want to explode and outgrow the type of community that we've become."

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