

Building A New, Old-Fashioned Bank

One bank, one builder, one goal. How Gateway Bank, Brian Ehlers Construction, and the concept of design-build helped create Ocala's newest landmark.

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Over photographs of South Carolina homes and fluted street lights spread out across the conference table, the Gateway Bank site committee shared its vision for its new location on historic Silver Springs Boulevard. Gateway would forgo the cold, industrial look so prevalent in bank design for a distinctly Southern style, complete with large colonial columns and aged brick pavers out front and warm woods and a grand staircase within.



For Project Manager Holland Drake of Brian Ehlers Construction, the job was the opportunity of a lifetime.

"I was extremely passionate about building it," he recalls. "This was a chance to be a part of a true Ocala landmark. We promised the bank we would produce exactly what they wanted."

If the concept meeting seems unlikely, that's because it rarely happens in construction anymore. An owner poring over photos with a project manager to express and perfect his vision is virtually unheard of today, but direct communication between client and builder is at the heart of design-build, a time-honored approach that allows the client to design and re-design throughout the building process.

"We had a vision for what we wanted through a series of photographs," CEO Tom Ingram says. "We gave them to the architect, Andy Copeland, and to Brian and Holland, and they ran with it. But then with design-build, you have a lot of input along the way."

"The owner is more hands-on," Holland adds. "I kept working and working until the building looked exactly like the bank wanted it."

Their tireless diligence is unmistakable in the final product. Past the stately white columns and pair of glass-paned doors, the circular sitting area immediately inside the new bank is more study than waiting room with its high-back chairs, amber-glass chandelier, rug-carpeting and wood flooring, and glowing fireplace. Off to the left, a sweeping staircase curves up to the second floor, and old-fashioned teller windows, embellished with wrought-iron, are tucked off to the side, ensuring privacy for Gateway Bank clients. Down the hall, a small café area invites clients to sit and read the newspaper or have a latte.



"We're a small-town bank, and we're all about personal service," Tom says. "You have to have an environment that is conducive to that. We've tried to create a very warm, very friendly atmosphere that breaks down the barriers."

Though the design is reminiscent of the old South, the building itself is thoroughly modern in its energy efficiency. The 33-foot concrete exterior walls minimize temperature loss, and every room inside is equipped with sensors that automatically shut off lights when the space is vacant. Additionally, the roof's foam insulation is made from natural agricultural products, instead of oil.

Brian Ehlers hopes the Gateway Bank building will inspire other businesses in Ocala to commit to aesthetically pleasing construction.

"Hopefully," he says, "this will create a wave here for nice, new construction that enhances the community."

"There's a lot of rich tradition in Ocala," Tom adds. "We wanted to build something special that recognized the heritage of old Ocala, but also recognized that we're a growing community."

In a nod to the people of Ocala, Gateway Bank recently christened one of its four conference rooms the Onie Ponder Room after the 110-year-old native Ocalan whose grandson is an employee at the bank.

One of the most common misconceptions about design-build is cost, that such close client involvement and attention to detail must be prohibitively expensive. In the case of Gateway Bank, however, the method eliminated nearly a quarter of a million dollars by value-engineering.

"We value-engineered a lot of systems and put the savings into the aesthetics of the building," Holland explains. "We were able to prioritize the owner's goals and used our building knowledge to most practically build the best building for the owner."

"We could have done a plain-Jane building," Tom adds, "and it would have cost almost as much as this."

Design-build also allows for immediate attention when problems arise. When Tom was dissatisfied with the final exterior painting, he went directly to Holland to discuss alternatives.

"Some project managers would have been insulted, but Holland asked, 'How can we make it better? What can we do to get it right?'" Tom recalls. "We had artist Dale Henry come in, and he made it a masterpiece."



The Gateway Bank site committee, including (L to R) President Rusty Branson, Chris Armstrong, CEO Tom Ingram, Holland Drake, and Brian Ehlers (not pictured: Chairman

Albert Peek and Kirk Boone), dedicated much time to planning the bank's new location on East Silver Springs Boulevard.

"Design-build," Holland reiterates, "embraces teamwork instead of adversarial relationships, which are inherited in hard-bid projects. When you have a relationship that harnesses teamwork, the ultimate product is going to be better."

As Gateway Bank and Brian Ehlers Construction discovered by the building's completion, incorporating elements and addressing problems along the way as a team made for a product far superior than anything pictured in the initial concept photos.

The reason, Tom says, is design-build.

"The key is to have a builder who embraces that concept, and that's what you get with Brian Ehlers Construction. You get the willingness to make it better than you ever thought it could be."

The Experts Behind Gateway Bank

Bringing Gateway Bank's vision to fruition required a talented team of experts, and Brian Ehlers Construction worked with only the best. Design-build demands close attention to detail and a high standard of excellence, which is precisely why the following businesses were chosen for the project. Here are some of the key contributors to Ocala's newest landmark.

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