

SAN DIEGO'S TOP INFLUENTIALS

2013 Edition

ERIC ELLINGSEN

CFO adapts easily to economic,
regulatory environment

By CAMERON LEIGH JAMES
Special to The Daily Transcript

Originally from Oslo, Norway, son of a Norwegian father and Canadian mother, Eric Ellingsen tells a classic American success story. As an international salesman, his father moved the family around a lot. Ellingsen spent his high school years in Venezuela and Montreal, Canada. He got his undergraduate degree from a regional college in Virginia and headed west in his early 20s to California, where



he took an entry-level accounting position at **California Bank & Trust** in 1999. He got his MBA in 2005 from the University of California, Los Angeles, while still working for the bank. Now 36, he's the bank's chief financial officer.

California Bank & Trust, a subsidiary of **Zions Bancorporation** (Nasdaq: ZION), is one of the largest banks headquartered in California, with more than \$10 billion in assets and 102 branches, 25 in San Diego. In 2009 the bank acquired two failed banks: Culver City's Alliance Bank and Rancho Cucamonga-based Vineyard Bank.

"We prided ourselves in being able to do that because we were viewed as a strong bank at the time," Ellingsen said. "It was good for our organization and allowed us to grow as a company."

It doesn't mean California Bank & Trust hasn't suffered its share of cuts and bruises along with the rest of the banking industry over the past five years — only that it fared better than most largely because of the experience of its management team and its overall conservative culture.

"We've returned to profitability. Our credit losses are back to pre-crisis levels. We have very low losses and fairly clean credit quality," he said. "We have strengthened our liquidity, and we're holding a lot more capital than we had going into the downturn so we're in good shape and position to grow."

Heading into 2013, Ellingsen sees a lot of opportunities for the bank in California and in San Diego. Low interest rates are driving refinancings and growing its mortgage business. Although it's being more selective, its commercial business is growing, and the bank is seizing opportunities in real estate, specifically apartment lending.

Admittedly, these opportunities are mixed with a few challenges. Ellingsen foresees that the low-interest rates fueling mortgage business growth will put pressure on the bank's profit margins. Low economic activity will have an impact on the demand for products and services, and complying with a rapidly changing regulatory environment while trying to anticipate changes continues to be difficult.

"It does take resources to ensure that we are complying, and it does compromise our ability to grow the business," he said. "There's no doubt about that."

Even so, Ellingsen said the bank's branch managers and relationship-makers are active in community and professional organizations, and seek new customers. The bank takes pride in differentiating itself by offering a higher level of service with local decision-makers that larger institutions can't give.

"We offer a Small Business Administration qualified loan product, and we are actively looking for new customers and the opportunity to help businesses grow," he said.

Ellingsen has always been motivated to succeed at whatever he sets out to accomplish.

"I'm part of a really great management team, and that's one of the reasons I'm still around," he said. "I really enjoy working with the people I work with and tackling these challenges and opportunities as they come along."

~ James is an Encinitas-based freelance writer.

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