

GRAND
BANKSHARES, INC.

April 1, 2004

Via Facsimile - (202) 452-3819

Jennifer J. Johnson, Secretary
Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System
20th Street and Constitution Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20551

**Re: Proposed Revisions to the Community Reinvestment Act Regulations
Docket No. R-1181**

Dear Ms. Johnson:

I strongly endorse the federal bank regulatory agencies' (Agencies) proposal to increase the number of banks and saving associations to be examined under the small institution Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) examination. The Agencies propose to increase the asset threshold from \$250 million to \$500 million and to eliminate any consideration of whether the small institution is owned by a holding company. This proposal is a major step toward appropriate implementation of the Community Reinvestment Act and should greatly reduce expensive regulatory burden on those institutions newly made eligible for the small institution examination. However, the proposal should go further. I will explain.

When the CRA regulations were rewritten in 1995, the banking industry recommended then that community banks of \$500 million be eligible for a less burdensome small institution examination. The most significant improvement in the new regulations was the addition of that small institution CRA examination, which actually did what the Act required: Directed examiners to review the bank's loans and assess whether the bank is helping to meet the credit needs of the bank's entire community. It imposed no investment requirement on small banks, since the Act is about credit, not investment. It added no data reporting requirements on small banks, fulfilling the promise of the Act's sponsor, Senator Proxmire, that there would be no additional paperwork or recordkeeping burden on banks if the Act passed. And it created a simple, understandable assessment test of the bank's record of providing credit in its community: The test considers the institution's loan-to-deposit ratio; the percentage of loans in its assessment

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areas; its record of lending to borrowers of different income levels and businesses and farms of different sizes; the geographic distribution of its loans; and its record of taking action, if warranted, in response to written complaints, if any, about its performance in helping to meet credit needs in its assessment areas.

Since then, the regulatory burden on small banks has increased tremendously. The massive new reporting requirements under FIDIA, USA Patriot Act and the privacy provisions of the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act are among the regulations causing additional burden. But the nature of community banks has not changed. When a community bank must comply with the requirements of the large institution CRA examination, the expense and operational burden increase dramatically.

The present size of my bank is \$210 million. Likely, we will exceed \$250 million later this year. When we convert to the large institution examination standards, we will be required to devote additional staff time to verify compliance with CRA. This imposes a dramatically higher regulatory burden that drains both money and personnel away from helping to meet the credit needs of the institution's community. Yet our primary focus of lending to my community will not change at all. We currently loan largely to the community and will continue to do so. Yet, it will cost a great deal more money to be the same bank we are today.

I believe that it is as true today as it was in 1995, as well as in 1977 when Congress enacted CRA, that a community bank meets the credit needs of its community if it makes a certain amount of loans relative to deposits taken. If a community bank does not loan primarily to its community, it quickly becomes known and profits suffer. A community bank is typically non-complex; it takes deposits and makes loans. Its business activities are usually focused on small, defined geographic areas where the bank is known in the community. The small institution examination accurately captures the information necessary for examiners to assess whether a community bank is helping to meet the credit needs of its community, and nothing more is required to satisfy the Act.

As the Agencies state in their proposal, raising the small institution CRA examination threshold to \$500 makes numerically more community banks eligible. However, in reality raising the asset threshold to \$500 million and eliminating the holding company limitation would retain the percentage of industry assets subject to the large retail institution test. It would decline only slightly, from a little more than 90% to a little less than 90%. That decline, though slight, would more closely align the current distribution of assets between small and large banks with the distribution that was anticipated when the Agencies

adopted **the** definition of "small institution." Thus, the Agencies, in revising **the CRA** regulation, are really just preserving **the status quo** of the regulation, which has been altered by a drastic decline in the number of **banks**, inflation and an enormous increase in the size of large banks. I believe that the Agencies need to provide **greater relief** to community banks than just preserve the *status quo* of this regulation.

While the small institution test was; the **most** significant improvement of the revised **CRA**, it was **wrong** to limit its application to only **banks** below **\$250** million in **assets**; depriving many community banks **from any** regulatory relief. Currently, a bank with more **than** \$250 million in assets faces significantly more requirements that substantially increase regulatory burdens without consistently producing additional benefits as contemplated by the Community Reinvestment Act. In today's banking market, even a \$500 million bank often has **only a** handful of branches. I recommend raising **the asset** threshold for the **small** institution examination to at least \$1 billion. Raising the limit to \$1 billion is **appropriate** for **two** reasons. First, keeping the focus of small institutions **on** lending, which the small institution examination does, **would be** entirely consistent with the purpose of the **Community Reinvestment Act**, which is to ensure that the Agencies evaluate how **banks help** to meet the credit needs of the communities they **serve**.

Second, raising the limit to \$1 **billion** will **have** only a small effect on the amount of total industry assets covered under the more comprehensive large bank test. According to the Agencies' own findings, **raising** the limit **from** \$250 to \$500 million **would** reduce total industry assets covered by the large bank test by less than one percent. According to December 31, 2003, **Call Report** data, raising the limit to \$1 billion will reduce the amount of **assets** subject to **the** much **more** burdensome large institution test by only 4% (**to about** 85%). Yet, the additional relief **provided** would, **again**, be substantial, reducing the compliance **burden on** more than 500 **additional** banks and savings associations (compared to a \$500 million limit). Accordingly, I urge the Agencies to raise **the** limit to at **least** \$1 billion, providing significant regulatory relief while, to quote the Agencies in the proposal, **not diminishing** "in any way the obligation of all insured depository institutions subject to **CRA** to help meet **the** credit needs of **their** communities. Instead, the changes are meant only to address the regulatory burden associated with **evaluating** institutions under **CRA**."

In conclusion, I strongly support and recommend (1) increasing the asset-size of banks eligible for the small bank streamlined CRA examination process **as a** vitally important step in revising and **improving** the CRA regulations and in reducing regulatory burden; (2) **Eliminating** the separate holding company qualification for the **small institution** examination, **since it places small**

community banks that are part of a larger holding company at a disadvantage to their peers and has no legal basis in the Act.

Community banks will continue to be examined under CRA for their record of helping to meet the credit needs of their communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Russell Greene", written over a light gray rectangular background.

J. Russell Greene
President

JRG:ms