



October 9, 2012

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

Office of the Comptroller of the Currency
250 E Street, SW
Mail Stop 2-3
Washington, DC 20219

Robert E. Feldman
Executive Secretary
Attention: Comments/Legal ESS
Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation,
550 17th Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20429

Re: Basel III Capital Proposals

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the Basel III proposals that were recently issued for public comment by the Federal Reserve Board, the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation. These proposals are titled:

- Regulatory Capital Rules: Regulatory Capital, Implementation of Basel III, Minimum Regulatory Capital Ratios, Capital Adequacy, and Transition Provisions;
- Regulatory Capital Rules: Standardized Approach for Risk-weighted Assets; Market Discipline and Disclosure Requirements; and
- Regulatory Capital Rules: Advanced Approaches Risk-based Capital Rules; Market Risk Capital Rule.

Northway Bank is a community bank with total assets of \$836 million at June 30, 2012. Northway Bank is the wholly-owned subsidiary of Northway Financial, Inc., a one-bank holding company with total consolidated assets of \$842 million at June 30, 2012. Both comfortably exceed well-capitalized standards under the current regulatory requirements. Our comments concerning the Basel III proposals are as follows:

Applicability of Basel III to Community Banks

Community banks should be allowed to continue using the current Basel I framework for computing their capital requirements. Basel III was designed to apply to the largest, internationally active, banks and not community banks. Community banks did not engage in the highly leveraged activities that severely depleted capital levels of the largest banks and created panic in the financial markets. Community banks operate on a relationship-based business model that is specifically designed to serve customers in their respective communities on a long-term basis. This model contributes to the success of community banks all over the United States through practical, common sense approaches to managing risk. The largest banks operate purely on transaction volume and pay little attention to the customer relationship. This difference in banking models demonstrates the need to place tougher capital standards exclusively on the largest banks to better manage the ability to absorb losses.

Incorporating Accumulated Other Comprehensive Income as Part of Regulatory Capital

Inclusion of accumulated other comprehensive income (AOCI) in capital for community banks will result in increased volatility in regulatory capital balances and could rapidly deplete capital levels under certain economic conditions. AOCI for most community banks represents unrealized gains and losses on investment securities held available-for-sale. Because these securities are held at fair value, any gains or losses due to changes in interest rates are captured in the valuation. Recently, both short-term and long-term interest rates have fallen to historic lows generating unprecedented unrealized gains for most investment securities. Additionally, demand for many implicitly and explicitly government guaranteed securities has risen due to a flight to safety and government intervention in the capital markets. This increased demand has caused credit spreads to tighten further increasing bond valuations.

Interest rates have fallen to levels that are unsustainable long-term once an economic recovery accelerates. As interest rates rise, fair values will fall causing the balance of AOCI to decline and become negative. This decline will have a direct, immediate impact on common equity, tier 1, and total capital as the unrealized losses will reduce capital balances. At Northway Bank if interest rates increased by 300 basis points, its bond portfolio would show a paper loss of \$32 million, compared to the reported June 30, 2012 unrealized gain of \$5 million. This would mean that Northway Bank's tier one risk-based ratio would drop by 3.40%, from 15.76% to 12.36%. Large financial institutions have the ability to mitigate the risks of capital volatility by entering into qualifying hedge accounting relationships for financial accounting purposes with the use of interest rate derivatives like interest rate swaps, options, and futures contracts. Community banks do not have the knowledge or expertise to engage in these transactions and manage their associated risks, costs, and barriers to entry. Community banks should continue to exclude AOCI from capital measures as they are currently required to do today.

Capital Conservation Buffers

Implementation of the capital conservation buffers for community banks will be difficult to achieve under the proposal and therefore should not be implemented. Many community banks will need to build additional capital balances to meet the minimum capital requirements with the buffers in place. Community banks do not have ready access to capital that the larger banks have through the capital markets. The only way for community banks to increase capital is through the

accumulation of retained earnings over time. Due to the current ultra low interest rate environment, community bank profitability has diminished further hampering their ability to grow capital. If the regulators are unwilling to exempt community banks from the capital conservation buffers, additional time should be allotted (at least five years beyond 2019) in order for those banks that need the additional capital to retain and accumulate earnings accordingly.

New Risk Weights

The proposed risk weight framework under Basel III is too complicated and will be an onerous regulatory burden that will penalize community banks and jeopardize the housing recovery. Increasing the risk weights for residential balloon loans, interest-only loans, and second liens will penalize community banks who offer these loan products to their customers and deprive customers of many financing options for residential property. Additionally, higher risk weights for balloon loans will further penalize community banks for mitigating interest rate risk in their asset-liability management. Community banks will be forced to originate only 15 or 30 year mortgages with durations that will make their balance sheets more sensitive to changes in long-term interest rates. Many community banks will either exit the residential loan market entirely or only originate those loans that can be sold to a GSE. Second liens will either become more expensive for borrowers or disappear altogether as banks will choose not to allocate additional capital to these balance sheet exposures. Community banks should be allowed to stay with the current Basel I risk weight framework for residential loans. Furthermore, community banks will be forced to make significant software upgrades and incur other operational costs to track mortgage loan-to-value ratios in order to determine the proper risk weight categories for mortgages.

Proposed Phase-out of Trust Preferred Securities

We object to the proposed ten year phase-out of the tier one treatment of instruments like trust preferred securities (TRUPS) because they are reliable sources of capital for community banks and their bank holding companies that would be very difficult to replace. We believe it was the intent of the Collins amendment of the Dodd-Frank Act to permanently grandfather tier one treatment of TRUPS issued by bank holding companies between \$500 million and \$15 billion. Phasing out this important source of capital would be a particular burden for many privately-held banks and bank holding companies that are facing greatly reduced alternatives in raising capital. With the proposed phase-out Northway Financial, Inc.'s tier one capital would be reduced by \$20 million, as it issued two TRUPS totaling \$20 million in 2007. While we applaud the fact that TRUPS issued by bank holding companies under \$500 million would not be impacted by the proposal, consistent with the Collins Amendment, we urge the banking regulators to continue the current tier one treatment of TRUPS issued by those bank holding companies with consolidated assets between \$500 million and \$15 billion in assets.

Mortgage Servicing Rights

Penalizing the existing mortgage servicing assets under the proposal is unreasonable for those banks that have large portfolios of mortgage servicing rights. Any mortgage servicing rights existing on community bank balance sheets should be allowed to continue to follow the current risk weight and deduction methodologies.

In closing, thank you again for the opportunity to comment on the Basel III proposals. Should you have any questions concerning my comments, please call me at (603) 326 - 1044.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Orsillo', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Richard F. Orsillo
SVP & CFO Northway Bank &
Northway Financial, Inc.