

## Mortgage company booming, looking to hire and expand

By Bob Campbell

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**P**ort Huron-based First Preferred Mortgage not only weathered the home mortgage crisis of the past few years—the privately held company is booming.

Founded in 1992 by brothers Hale and Mark Walker, the company now has 240 employees after a major expansion in 2010 with a new call-in mortgage center in Port Huron and has plans to hire at least 49 loan originators, underwriters, processors, compliance specialists and training staff in the next few months.

Slightly more than 60% of the company's business is in wholesale mortgages and is conducted under the name Michigan Mutual with offices in Bingham Farms. That operation will soon consolidate with a retail mortgage call center in the Galleria Officentre in Southfield. The wholesale operation buys and sells existing mortgages or the rights to service mortgages.

Hale Walker, senior vice president, said the combined companies did \$1.1 billion in business in 2010 and aim to hit \$1.7 billion in 2011, partly via mergers and acquisitions.

"Some of the changes and some of the troubles in the industry have been the impetus for our growth and success," said Hale Walker. "We've basically embraced the changes."

In 2010, the company collaborated with the Michigan Works! program, St. Clair County and St. Clair County Community College to find hires for its St. Clair County mortgage call center.

Much of the business the company gets begins with tips about people seeking mortgages that come from aggregators like Lending Tree.

From there, it's up to the company's mortgage brokers to convince mortgage seekers that the company is their best choice. A competitive rate is important, but delivering on service guarantees of timing, no surprise costs and attention to detail is crucial to winning customers, Walker said.

"It's our job to just show you it will be an outstanding customer experience," he said.



From left, Vince Parlove, Michigan Mutual president, First Preferred CEO Mark Walker and Senior Vice President Hale Walker at the company's new office in the Galleria Officentre in Southfield.

That's accomplished, he said, by looking at the criticisms of the industry and making sure his team avoids the pitfalls. Horror stories have emerged in recent years about lenders who pushed—sometimes faking qualifying documents—customers into loans they were certain to default on.

"We want not just to do your loan but you to tell your family and friends" to bring in their business, he said.

Even though the company writes, services and wholesales loans in 30 states, there are no plans to leave Michigan.

Drastic job losses have left the state more competitive nationally on wages and, more importantly, created a huge pool of "some very well-educated people who are out of work."

Of Michigan, he said: "This is a wonderful place to do business," though he acknowledges the state's controversial business tax—which Gov. Rick Snyder has vowed to overhaul—is a drawback.

### First Preferred Mortgage

**Founded:** 1992

**Headquarters:** Port Huron, with offices in Bingham Farms and Southfield

**Business model:** Writes retail loans for home buyers and refinancing in Michigan and 29 other states; operates wholesale mortgage business under the name Michigan Mutual

**Employees at founding:** 2

**Employees today:** 240

**Hiring planned in early 2011:** At least 49

**Loans closed in 2010:** More than 6,400

**Value of loans:** \$1.1 billion

**Loan value target for 2011:** \$1.7 billion

**Web site:** www.firstpreferred.com

**Phone:** 800-700-5839