acquisitions we couldn’t compete in the market,” says Cloutier. Income is also headed back up. Cloutier says the bank will make a profit in the first quarter of 1991.

The merger activity locally is not unique. It is part of a nationwide trend in banking. Some observers predict that the numbers of banks in the country could be reduced by two-thirds during this decade. And while much of that consolidation will come through local banks acquiring each other, there are some even bigger fish eyeing the local bait in Louisiana.

Banc One, based in Columbus, Ohio, entered into an agreement with Premier Bancorp earlier this year that could lead to purchase of the Louisiana holding company at some point in the next five years. And several Mississippi banks are reportedly interested in taking over Louisiana institutions.

Sun Burst Bank of Jackson, Miss., which took over Capital Bank in Baton Rouge, has “an interest in the Lafayette area,” says one local banker.

And CityBusiness, a business paper in New Orleans, reported last month that an Alabama bank was considering acquisitions in Louisiana, massive troubled Pelican Homestead in New Orleans.

This trend is worrisome to Charles Patout, president of Gulf Coast Bank in Abbeville. “What you are going to have is a few big banks and you are not going to have any small neighborhood banks. Hopefully, the American public will wake up and see this,” says Patout.

Unlike some of his counterparts in Acadia na, Patout argues that a bank of his size can compete successfully in the market. “We offer everything a large bank offers except a trust department,” says Patout. “We believe in personal service.”

Gulf Coast has also resisted the temptation to expand its geographic market by purchasing other banks. “We have already turned down many opportunities to look at acquisitions,” says Patout. “We don’t feel we should take a chance to risk our capital . . . Conservatism is the reason we have succeeded, [that] and servicing our community.”

Patout’s decision to be a big fish in a small pond has paid off. Last year, Gulf Coast Bank made almost $1.5 million in profit, a return on assets of about 1.5 percent. That puts Gulf Coast in the category of high performance banks. With numbers like those, it’s hard to argue with his success.