

Everything is bigger in Texas,
especially this 75,593-square-foot convenience store
with the iconic beaver brand.

THE WORLD'S BIGGEST BUC-EE'S LANDS IN LULING

By Melissa Segrest ● Photos by Laura Skelding

It is just past 5:30 a.m. on June 10, and 120 Buc-ee's employees are gathered for a pep talk in the center of the chain's newest store in Luling. The grand opening is about to begin, and Josh Smith, the company's director of operations, is pumping everyone up — “Are y'all excited, or what?” Workers answer with a chorus of whoops and cheers.

About 10 minutes later, the doors of this brightly lit store slide open to visitors for the very first time, and a crowd of smiling shoppers streams across the threshold of this dream come true for Buc-ee's fans.

This Luling store is not just the newest Buc-ee's — it is the largest convenience store on the planet, according to both Buc-ee's and the National Association of Convenience Stores.

At 75,593 square feet, about 1.7 acres, the “travel center” is bigger than a football field and could hold 25 standard-sized convenience stores. The Luling store's debut demotes the 74,000-square-foot Buc-ee's in Sevierville, Tenn., to second place on the global list. It's fitting that the title returns to Texas, since the Tennessee store had wrested it from the 66,000-square-foot Buc-ee's on Interstate 35 in New Braunfels in 2023.

Visiting this newest mega-Buc-ee's, at 10070 I-10, is an experience.

Eventually, the location will boast 120 fuel pumps — as soon as the previous Buc-ee's next door, which was 35,000 square feet, makes way for more pumps and parking. As of late July, there were 96 fuel pumps under a tall canopy stretching east to west, with an additional 24 coming soon.

Inside the mammoth store, visitors can browse an array of thousands of fresh and prepackaged foods; dozens of drink stations; a big, colorful home goods and décor area; shelves and racks of clothing and outdoors items emblazoned with the Buc-ee's beaver logo; and an eye-popping assortment of other goodies you never knew you needed. Signs direct customers to the “cleanest restrooms in America.” An employee in a Buc-ee the Beaver mascot costume will pose for selfies with anyone who asks.

The shelves are always stocked. The aromas of fresh chopped brisket

Story continued on Page 18



Above left: At the grand opening of the new Buc-ee's on Interstate 10 in Luling, Michael and Christie Conley, in their favorite Buc-ee the Beaver-themed outfits. The couple were among the first customers in the new store, and said they plan trips around Buc-ee's locations. **Above right:** Among the eye candy at the giant convenience store are large, uniform displays of sweets, snacks and Buc-ee's products, including a wall of jerky, dog toys and sweet Beaver Nuggets in three flavors. **Below:** The store, seen from the sky, spans about 1.7 acres, with 96 covered fuel pumps in front. When the original Buc-ee's store, at left, is removed and construction is complete, there will be a total of 120 fuel pumps and more parking space. *Aerial photo by Joe Stafford*



From left: Swimwear, like women's bright red suits, is a hot summer Buc-ee's best-seller. The art of preparing barbecue, like chopped brisket bathed with a ladleful of sauce, is a key part of employee training. Just before the new doors opened at the new Buc-ee's, employees get fired up. “Y'all deserve every square inch of this building!” a Buc-ee's executive said. *Joe Stafford photo*



The vast interior of the world's largest convenience store, where seeing from one end to the other can be a challenge, features departments stocked with everything from home décor to outdoor goods to clothes to thousands of food and drink items.

Continued from Page 16

and pulled pork, roasted nuts, just-baked kolaches and fudge fill the air. There will be 200 employees at the Luling store, ensuring someone is always nearby to answer questions. Bags of sweet, crunchy Beaver Nuggets — the store's eponymous, best-selling snack — can be found around almost every corner.

This Buc-ee's is a dizzying mash-up of a modern-day mercantile, food festival, snack pantry and gas station on steroids — all with a sprinkling of Disneyland-style magic.

The restrooms are indeed impressive. Spaces are plentiful and pristine. Women can choose from 34 roomy stalls, with tall privacy doors and a light above each that glows green or red to signal its availability. Men's facilities have 19 urinals and 17 toilet stalls. Round-the-clock cleaning teams maintain a low profile. Visitors may not see these workers, but they can take note of their efforts: No specks of paper litter the floor, no puddles of water stand by the sinks, and no trash cans overflow.

This attention to detail has made the Buc-ee's chain one of the rare businesses that have crossed from simple convenience-store commerce to cultural phenomenon, a "destination" must-stop for multitudes of highway drivers.

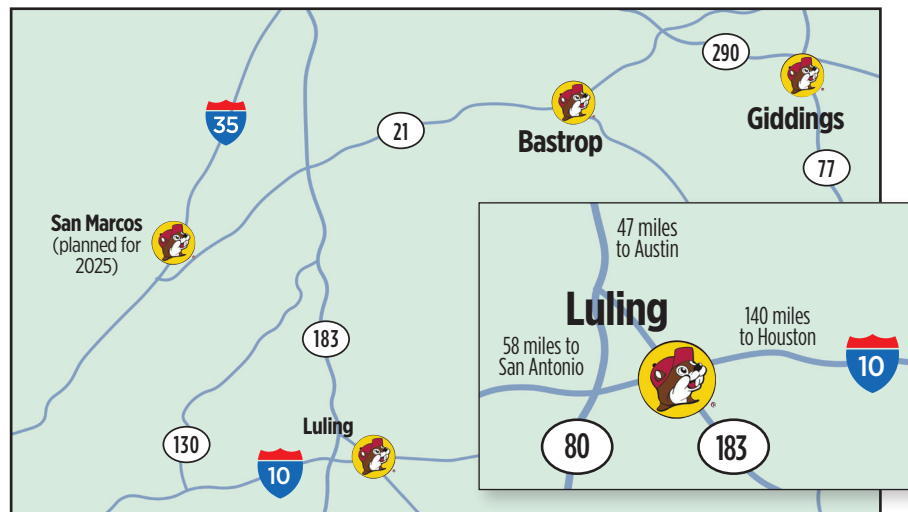
A simple formula has fueled Buc-ee's success: clean restrooms, friendly employees and inexpensive gas at lots of pumps. The company's success has grown thanks to word of mouth, fans' social media posts, enthusiastic news accounts and witty billboards that strategically dot highways leading to the stores.

Going big underpins the Buc-ee's business philosophy. And, of course, bigger is best in Texas.

The Buc-ee's story

In 1982, Arch "Beaver" Aplin III opened the first Buc-ee's location at a crossroads

Buc-ee's in the region



near Lake Jackson and Clute, 60 miles south of Houston and 10 miles from the Gulf Coast.

The idea for the smiling Buc-ee the Beaver mascot, it has been widely stated, sprang from an Aplin childhood nickname — "Bucky Beaver" (the cartoon mascot of a toothpaste brand), a beloved dog named Buck and the nearby Brazoswood High School Buccaneers.

The privately held company remains headquartered in Lake Jackson. The early Buc-ee's stores, many of which are still in operation, were not jumbo-sized.

That changed with the opening of the original Luling Buc-ee's in 2003, the chain's first large-format travel center. The biggest Buc-ee's are typically found off major highways, midway between large cities, to attract drivers making multihour trips.

As of late July, Buc-ee's boasted 35 locations in Texas and 15 in other states.

Groundbreaking has happened or is scheduled for five more locations, including one in Amarillo. News reports indicate more travel centers are planned for other states, plus at least two more in Texas — in Boerne and San Marcos.

The pace of Buc-ee's growth shows no signs of slowing.

The Luling Buc-ee's gets its electricity from Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative. It opened 19 months after breaking ground. There are other Buc-ee's in or planned for the Bluebonnet region. Store #16 in Giddings, one of the chain's smaller stops, opened in 2000. A 56,000-square-foot travel center opened in Bastrop in 2012. Earlier this year, the San Marcos City Council approved plans for a 74,000-square-foot Buc-ee's that promises at least 175 full-time jobs, according to multiple news reports. It will be built on the southbound I-35 frontage road, just south of Yarrington Road.



Top left: Customers stream into the world's largest Buc-ee's in Luling at 6 a.m. on grand opening day. **Top right:** Gas pumps aplenty spread into the distance. **Above:** Pitmaster Randy Pauly, in the center wearing black and red, joins the rest of the Buc-ee's cooking team to show off a brisket freshly prepared in the store.



A few miles to the south, also on I-35, is the New Braunfels Buc-ee's, which opened in 2012 as the world's largest convenience store.

Luling was an optimal site for the massive expansion, because the store store was the original "travel center" in the chain. But it became frequently crowded and fuel pumps were often occupied, even after it underwent two expansions over the years, according to an executive at the grand opening.

"It just didn't feel right to build the biggest Buc-ee's anywhere other than Luling," Aplin said. "As I like to say, when things are going really well, we're just getting started. It'll be a

Continued on next page



Above left: An employee hands out samples of the many varieties of fudge at the sweets station in the center of the store. Nuts are roasted and flavored there, as well.

Above: An employee carefully places a breakfast taco into an orderly display.

Left: Buc-ee's touts its restrooms as the cleanest in the world. The spacious women's restroom offers numerous private stalls equipped with indicator lights signaling their availability.

10 fun facts about the world's largest Buc-ee's

1. Open all day, every day, 365 days a year
2. Want to call the store? You can't. The no-calls policy keeps employees' focus on in-store customers
3. 96 gas pumps (as of late July) and 16 Tesla Supercharger EV stations; a total of 120 gas pumps (and more parking) planned after construction on old Buc-ee's site
4. No 18-wheelers or extended parking lot stays allowed
5. There is no Buc-ee's online store — if you want a Buc-ee's swimsuit, you'll have to drive for it
6. 22 varieties of fudge — red velvet and peanut butter chocolate are popular, while opinions are mixed on key lime pie
7. A wall of beef jerky, with 14 flavors — Bohemian garlic is most popular
8. 20 types/flavors of roasted nuts, 16 varieties of jelly, 5 seasoning blends
9. 80 soft-drink stations
10. Buc-ee's candles come in the scents of Beaver Nuggets, cinnamon roll and house blend coffee



Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who attended the ribbon cutting on the giant store's opening day, congratulates Buc-ee's owner Arch 'Beaver' Aplin III.

Continued from previous page

lot of fun to bring the biggest convenience store in the world back to Texas."

An economic boost for growing Luling

The Luling Buc-ee's is well situated on I-10, 141 miles from Houston, 58 miles from San Antonio and 50 miles down U.S. 183 from Austin. It is expected to have a significant impact on employment and economic growth in Luling, with a population of 5,754 in 2023. Caldwell County is anticipated to experience similar benefits.

With at least 200 employees, it would be Luling's largest employer as of June, according to city officials. Many of the employees from the older Luling store work at the new Buc-ee's. The chain touts full-time jobs with good pay, career-advancement opportunities, 401(k) retirement plans that match up to 6% of employees' contributions, three weeks of paid time off and health benefits. A sign above the store's front doors lists pay: Entry-level workers earn \$18 to \$21 an hour, well above minimum wage. Department managers can make up to \$33 an hour, assistant general managers \$125,000 and above annually, and general managers \$225,000 and higher.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who attended the travel center's ribbon-cutting on opening day, said the Luling store is a \$40 million investment that adds to Texas' booming business economy. "This Buc-ee's is the key to the future of Luling," Abbott said. "Buc-ee's is just one important piece of the economy of the bigger, better Texas we are building for generations to come."

Luling Mayor CJ Watts said the travel center gives the city a big economic boost. Between Buc-ee's and several other fast-

growing businesses there, new residential developments with hundreds of homes are planned, according to Watts and City Manager Mark Mayo.

Both the City of Luling and Caldwell County offered sales tax incentives to help secure the new Buc-ee's. City officials and staff worked closely with company leaders, including Aplin, to make the record-breaking facility a reality.

"We wanted to make sure that we did our part," said Caldwell County Judge Hoppy Haden, who worked closely with Luling officials. "Buc-ee's is one of the biggest employers in our county, and they really take good care of their employees," he said. "Somebody with a high school education ... can get a job there and make a living wage, grow within the company and have a chance to be a manager someday. It's a career path."

Visitors to Buc-ee's will benefit Luling, its school district and Caldwell County — not only from sales and property taxes, but also from added spending in the community. "It's really put the name Luling on the map in a very big way," Mayo said. "People are calling from all over the place."



Patrick O'Donnell from Pennsylvania was the first person in line at the Luling grand opening. Joe Stafford photos

The 150-year-old town, originally fueled by booming oil and gas production — and still known for its annual Watermelon Thump — is gaining new momentum with more retail, manufacturing and potential warehousing businesses, said Trey Bailey, the executive director of Luling's economic development corporation.

The Buc-ee's phenomenon

On opening day, a cheery, Randy Pauly, the talkative official "pitmaster" and director of barbecue for Buc-ee's, made the rounds with members of the media, curious customers and employees working behind the Texas Round Up barbecue station near the center of the store. He travels to each new Buc-ee's, teaching the fine art of preparing chopped brisket, and other skills, to employees. Pauly, who said he is a former professional barbecue competitor, is a polished pitchman.

Watching a first-time visitor enter a very large Buc-ee's can be interesting. It's "that moment, that 'wow' when they walk through that door," said Richard Barkley, Buc-ee's regional director of operations, at the grand opening. "It's a reminder that all the work that goes into creating a store like Luling's Buc-ee's is worth it."

Opening day started very early for Patrick O'Donnell from Pennsylvania, who was first in line when the doors opened. He had arrived the night before, he said.

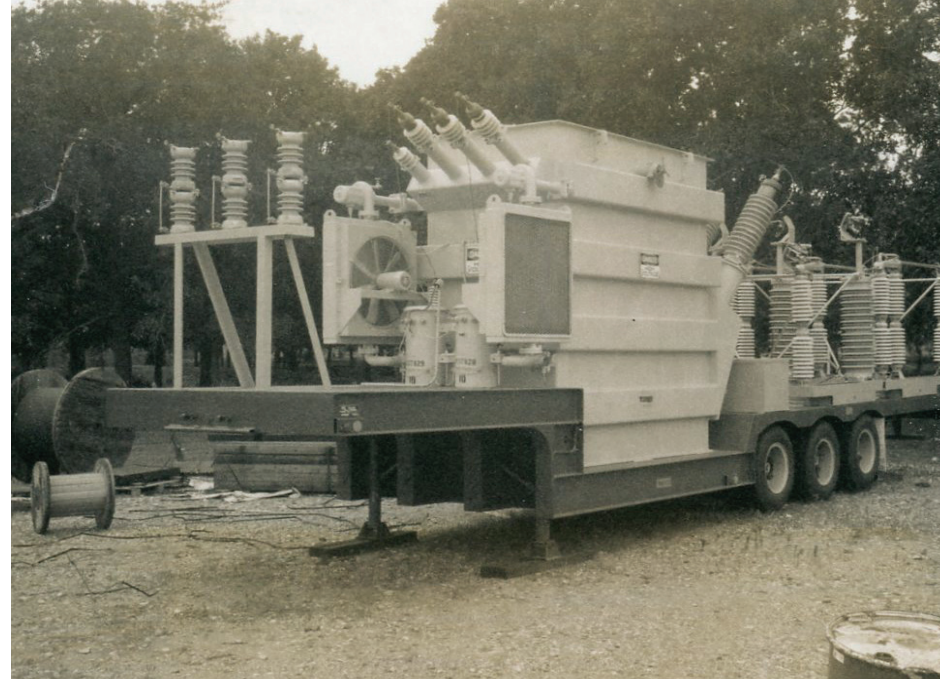
"My first visit to a Buc-ee's was in 2007 in Madisonville," about 100 miles northwest of Houston, he said. Since then, he added proudly, he has visited every one of the company's locations. "This is my first grand opening, though," he said. Many hours later, after the dignitaries had departed, a tired O'Donnell was still there. "I'm looking forward to the next one already," he said. "But I'll take some time to savor this." ■

that was THEN

Bluebonnet built its first mobile substation — a portable high-voltage facility that distributes electricity to large numbers of members — in 1980. Substations convert high-voltage electricity from power plants to lower voltages for homes and businesses.

This portable substation could power 2,400 homes during emergencies, planned outages or when large transformers were taken offline for maintenance.

An 18-wheeler hauled it to a Bluebonnet substation, where it took four to six hours to set up.



this is NOW

Today, Bluebonnet has two mobile substations in its fleet, and a third, larger one, is on order this year. Mobile substations are still hauled by 18-wheelers and take several hours to set up. Advances in technology and increased safety features make today's mobile substations easier for lineworkers and substation technicians to deploy and operate.



Top: Bluebonnet's first mobile substation was introduced to the fleet in 1980. It was 36 feet long and weighed 98,000 pounds.

Above: Bluebonnet purchased two mobile substations, in 2004 and 2015, and both are in service today. The 2004 model is more than 80 feet long, weighs 143,800 pounds, and can serve twice as many homes and businesses as the 1980 model.

Bluebonnet
85th
ANNIVERSARY

In 2024, Bluebonnet celebrates 85 years of providing safe, reliable and affordable electric service to its fast-growing membership. Throughout the year, join us in celebrating this milestone as we honor our past and plan for the future.

POWERING
PROGRESS
SINCE 1939

Bluebonnet teams excel at Lineman's Rodeo

AT A COMPETITION packed with skilled lineworkers from across the state, Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative teams secured spots to compete among the most elite lineworkers across the country at the International Lineman's Rodeo in October.

Nine apprentice lineworkers, four three-man journeyman teams, four barbecue pitmasters and 10 staff judges joined hundreds of colleagues from across the state at Nolte Island Park near Seguin for the 28th Texas Lineman's Rodeo on July 20.

The rodeo began at 6:30 a.m. to help ensure most events were completed before the midday summer heat. During the competition, lineworkers raced against time to climb and competitively work on unenergized power lines. They also performed tasks including replacing equipment and wiring transformers. Apprentice lineworkers tested their knowledge with a written exam.

While the competition was underway, lineworkers were cheered on by family, friends, coworkers and employees from other city and cooperative electric utilities.

Bluebonnet ended the day victorious. Michael Guajardo, Brandon Johnson and Kenneth Roush won first place for the second year in a row in the senior journeyman team division for lineworkers 45 and older.

"The keys to our success were our teamwork and communication," Guajardo said. "Talking through ideas, problem-solving and understanding each other's roles are vital for working toward a common goal."

Colton Burch, an apprentice lineworker, received two second-place awards: as apprentice lineworker and in the written exam. "It didn't feel real until they called my name," he said.

Journeyman lineworker team Kyle Kasper, Logan Lancaster and Andrew Murphy demonstrated speed and safety skills to place fourth in the pole climb event. To sweeten the deal, Zachary Handrick, Huston Burgess and Bryan Woods won fourth place for their brisket in the barbecue cook-off.

The biggest takeaway for first-time competitor Burch was the support he received from his family, coworkers and all the others who compete, he said.

"We practice specifically for the rodeo for



Bluebonnet's rodeo team and coaches celebrate their awards. Front row, from left: Brandon Johnson, Kenneth Roush, Colton Burch, Graesyn Courtney and her father, John Courtney. Back row, from left: Daniel Fritsche, Michael Guajardo, Danny Bolding, Kyle Kasper, Andrew Murphy, Logan Lancaster, Huston Burgess, Troy Moore, Matt Hollingsworth and Chris Rivera. Sarah Beal photos



Bluebonnet apprentice Justin Lewis from Giddings competes in the hurtman rescue event.

a handful of days, but in reality, we practice every day when we're working on restoring power for our members," Burch said.

Troy Moore, one of Bluebonnet's rodeo team coaches and a Bluebonnet line crew supervisor in Bastrop, said he was proud of how the team performed, adding that the rodeo gives apprentices and journeymen a chance to practice their skills, test their knowledge and build camaraderie.

"It's about building confidence and fostering teamwork, qualities that are crucial in our daily work providing reliable power to our community," Moore said.

Bluebonnet's 2024 rodeo team members were Reid Hanna, Nick Steuermann, Tucker



Huston Burgess carries smoking hot brisket that won fourth place in its category in the barbecue cook-off.

Saegert, Justin Lewis, Colton Burch, J.D. Boecker, Lane Magnuson, Cooper Lucher, Trevor Williams, Michael Guajardo, Kenneth Roush, Brandon Johnson, Kyle Kasper, Logan Lancaster, Andrew Murphy, John Courtney, Brad Young, Parker Redwine, Ty Duesterheft, John Zamora and Joe Lockhart. Coaches were Daniel Fritsche, Danny Bolding, Troy Moore and Chris Rivera.

Events at the rodeo, which was founded in 1996 and is hosted by the Texas Lineman's Rodeo Association, are designed to mirror the challenges lineworkers across the state encounter daily while working to provide reliable power to more than 30 million Texans. ■

CHILDHOOD CANCER AWARENESS MONTH

Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's buildings will shine in gold at night throughout September for Childhood Cancer Awareness Month. Trucks will display gold ribbons. Visit any of our member service centers to pick up a ribbon to show your support. Visit our website at bluebonnet.coop/childhood-cancer for resources and ways to get involved.

OFFICE CLOSINGS

Bluebonnet offices will be closed Sept. 2 for Labor Day. If you have a power outage, you can report it by texting OUT to 44141, online at bluebonnet.coop, via our MyBluebonnet mobile app or by calling 800-949-4414. You can pay bills any time online, on our mobile app or by calling 800-842-7708 (select option 2 when prompted).

Grants support upgrades to area community centers

BLUEBONNET ELECTRIC Cooperative provided two grants to community non-profit organizations and projects within the service territory. These grants were part of LCRA's Community Development Partnership Program. Bluebonnet is proud to partner with LCRA to support its members and communities.

Applications will be accepted in January 2025 for the next round of grants. For more information about this program and the application, visit lcra.org/cdpp.



A \$25,000 grant will help fund the construction of a new arts and cultural center in Fayetteville. This grant, along with more than \$2 million in matching funds from Fayetteville Community Center Group, will pay for the first phase of construction, which is underway. Pictured, from left, are Kate Ramzinski, LCRA regional affairs representative; Cassie Austin, Fayette County court administrator; Ben Kastleman, advisory committee member; Sherry Murphy, Bluebonnet's Giddings-area community representative; Mike Stroup, Fayetteville mayor; Byron Balke, Bluebonnet Board Assistant Secretary/Treasurer; Margaret D. "Meg" Voelter, LCRA board member; Pam Reynolds, Craig Moreau and John Reynolds, advisory committee members; Luke Sternadel, Fayette County commissioner, Precinct 2; Reid Bader, advisory committee member; Fred Roberts, community center group board treasurer; and Keely Mikolajchak, Bluebonnet intern.



A \$20,371 grant will help the St. John Colony Civic Center with facility improvements. This grant, along with about \$5,000 in matching funds and in-kind services, will allow St. John 19th Body to install a septic system and high-efficiency water heater, and add restrooms to its 3,600-square-foot multiuse building. Pictured, from left, are Jo Anna Gilland, Bluebonnet's Lockhart-area community representative; Rick Arnic, LCRA regional affairs representative; Diane Hill, organization treasurer; Rosie Lenear Darby, organization volunteer and event coordinator; Milton Shaw, Bluebonnet Board member; Marshall Hill Jr., organization assistant facility chef and member; Margaret D. "Meg" Voelter, LCRA board member; Doray Hill, organization vice president; Marshall Hill, organization president; Dyrall Thomas, Caldwell County commissioner, Precinct 4; Gracy Hill, organization secretary; and Charles Simms, organization mechanical maintenance supervisor and member. LCRA photos

SAVE THE DATE



**Saturday,
Oct. 19, 2024**

9 a.m.-noon
Bluebonnet Electric
Cooperative's
Headquarters
155 Electric Ave., Bastrop

● **Listen to Solar 101,
our introduction to
residential solar systems**

● **Meet homeowners
with solar systems**

● **Get information about
electric vehicles and their
chargers**

● **Find out about
battery storage
of solar power**

● **Explore the solar installer
fair, hosted by Texas Solar
Energy Society**

● **Open to the public**

Get more details at
bluebonnet.coop/energy-expo
or on Bluebonnet's Facebook,
Instagram and X/Twitter pages.