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Lakeland Companies Announce Expansion Plans

Publix to double size of warehouse; will start Aprons Cooking School, too

By [Kyle Kennedy](#)
THE LEDGER

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LAKELAND | Publix Super Markets Inc. is bringing its Apron's Cooking School concept to Lakeland.

Publix plans to open the cooking school at its Lake Miriam Square store sometime in the first half of 2012, said Clayton Hollis, Publix's vice president of public affairs.

Hollis spoke at the Lakeland Economic Development Council's annual breakfast meeting Tuesday, where a number of companies made announcements about their projects in Lakeland.

Lakeland-based Publix currently operates six Apron's Cooking School locations in Florida, and one site in Georgia. The schools offer about 30 classes a month and have featured appearances by celebrity chefs.

"Many of our Lakeland customers, including Carol Jenkins Barnett (daughter of Publix founder George Jenkins) have been asking for an Apron's Cooking School," Hollis said.

The standard class format consists of students watching instructors prepare meals, but there also is a hand-on class in which students can master various cooking skills by doing the actual work.

Hollis also shared Publix's plans for a warehouse expansion. The company will be doubling the size of its 550,000-square-foot warehouse off County Line Road used to store dry goods. Hollis said the project should break ground in July and be complete in July 2012.

Other projects discussed at Tuesday's LEDC meeting include:

New Jersey-based Matheson Tri-Gas is building a \$40 million air separation plant off North Combee Road near Saddle Creek Road and the Wilson Acres subdivision. The plant will liquefy nitrogen, oxygen and argon for sale to companies in the petrochemical, medical, and food and beverage industries, among others.

The Matheson facility is expected to become the second-largest user of electricity in Lakeland, behind Publix. Tom Larson, Matheson's vice president of engineering, said the plant is scheduled for completion by September 2012.

Chicago's JBT Corporation is evaluating sites for a new JBT FoodTech plant to



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Celebrity chef Steve Raichlen is shown in Lakeland in 2003 when he took part in an Aprons Cooking School sponsored by Publix.

replace its aging building at 400 Fairway Ave. in Lakeland. The \$16 million plant, expected to measure 140,000 square feet, will house a scientific research and technology center working on "fruit and juice solutions" for customers in the citrus industry.

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JBT employs 125 people in Lakeland and expects to add 23 workers within the next few years, said Joe Meyer, the firm's treasurer. Meyer said JBT is still reviewing potential sites for the new facility. A press release from the company said the plant should be operational by mid-2013.

Rooms To Go, who hosted today's meeting at its distribution center off Airport Road, had its own announcement to make. The furniture retailer wants to build another 300,000 square feet worth of distribution space near the Airport Road site, where it already has some 1.7 million square feet.

John Zapata, senior vice president of distribution at Rooms To Go, said the company plans to break ground on the new building next month. Rooms To Go has roughly 500 employees in Lakeland and will be adding 20 as part of the expansion, Zapata said.

[Kyle Kennedy can be reached at kyle.kennedy@theledger.com.]