

## LongHorn Steakhouse to Open Second Lakeland Location

**Will be third Polk County site for growing steakhouse chain**

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LAKELAND | Hope you're hungry for steak.

LongHorn Steakhouse is building a restaurant in North Lakeland and expects to open around the end of the year.

The Western-themed eatery will be at 3392 U.S. 98 North, adjacent to Hooters. Polk County has two existing LongHorn sites in South Lakeland and Winter Haven.

"We think there's good opportunity in the market. We're continuing to grow LongHorn so we're looking for great sites in markets where it performs well, and Lakeland is one of those," said Rich Jeffers, a spokesman for LongHorn.

LongHorn is owned by Orlando-based Darden Restaurants, which also owns the Red Lobster, Olive Garden and Seasons 52 chains. There are currently 358 LongHorn locations in 33 states, compared to 757 Olive Garden restaurants and 700 Red Lobster sites nationwide and Canada.

"We think (LongHorn) has the potential to be a national brand on par with those two," Jeffers said. "The steakhouse category is a growing category."



SCOTT WHEELER / THE LEDGER  
LONGHORN STEAKHOUSE is being constructed in North Lakeland, with an expected opening date at the end of the year.

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Darden acquired LongHorn and its parent company, Atlanta-based Rare Hospitality, in a \$1.4 billion deal four years ago. At the time Rare was opening about 25 new LongHorn sites per year, and Jeffers said Darden initially slowed LongHorn's growth as they integrated the chain during the recession.

Darden added just 10 new LongHorn sites in its fiscal 2010 year, opened 23 locations in fiscal 2011, and expects to open between 30 and 35 sites this year.

"We're continuing at a steady pace but we're not by any means overextending ourselves," Jeffers said. "We've got very strong brands. We're thankful for the loyalty we've developed."

The average LongHorn measures about 5,600 square feet and employs roughly 65 people, Jeffers said.

As LongHorn prepares its next Lakeland location, Louisville, Ky.-based Texas Roadhouse is opening its first restaurant here at 3621 S. Florida Ave, the former site of Bennigan's.

A spokeswoman for Texas Roadhouse said the restaurant has a projected opening date of Feb. 6, 2012.

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