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Polk to Get Its 1st Texas Roadhouse Restaurant

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LAKELAND | Texas Roadhouse has set a course for Lakeland.

The Kentucky-based restaurant chain plans to demolish the former Bennigan's on South Florida Avenue to make way for a new location, according to documents filed with the city.

It will be the first Texas Roadhouse in Polk County. Company officials were not available for comment Wednesday; an opening date for the Lakeland site is not yet known.

The building at 3621 S. Florida Ave. has sat empty since Bennigan's closed in July 2008 after the chain's owner filed for bankruptcy. The site is near the Merchants Walk shopping center, which has had its own struggles since the Lakeside Village shopping center opened in 2005.

"It's good to see the (Bennigan's) property redeveloped," said Jim Studiale, Lakeland's community development director. "It shows Merchants Walk continues to be a premier shopping center for Lakeland. I think you see shopping centers go through cycles, and this is a good sign it's growing and healthy again."

Based in Louisville, Ky., Texas Roadhouse Inc. operates more than 345 restaurants in 46 states, including 10 locations in Florida, according to its website. The publicly traded chain reported a net profit of roughly \$19.8 million in the first quarter, up 3 percent from a year ago; first quarter revenues increased 9 percent annually to about \$283.8 million.

Texas Roadhouse restaurants sport a casual, Western-themed decor, with menus that focus on steaks, ribs, chicken and sandwiches. Entree prices range from about \$8 to \$20.

Restaurant consultant Larry Ross said he thinks Texas Roadhouse has picked a good

site for its Lakeland location, but he says the chain might have trouble competing here.

"The first question is, are we ready for another Texas-style steakhouse, given that we have several," said Ross, a business professor at Florida Southern College. "They're going to be in there slugging it out with everyone else."

Ross also said many "mid-scale" restaurants like Texas Roadhouse are still struggling to attract and retain diners amid a weak economic recovery. He said "fast casual" chains such as Chipotle and Panera have had success drawing customers with lower price points.

Though steakhouses remain popular in Polk, they haven't been immune to the economy.

Lone Star Steakhouse closed in North Lakeland in February 2008, and Roadhouse Grill, also on U.S. 98 North, was shuttered the same year.

In late May 2008, Sam Seltzer's Steakhouse closed in South Lakeland, followed by the closure of Steak & Ale that July.

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