

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

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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's 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 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.

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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.

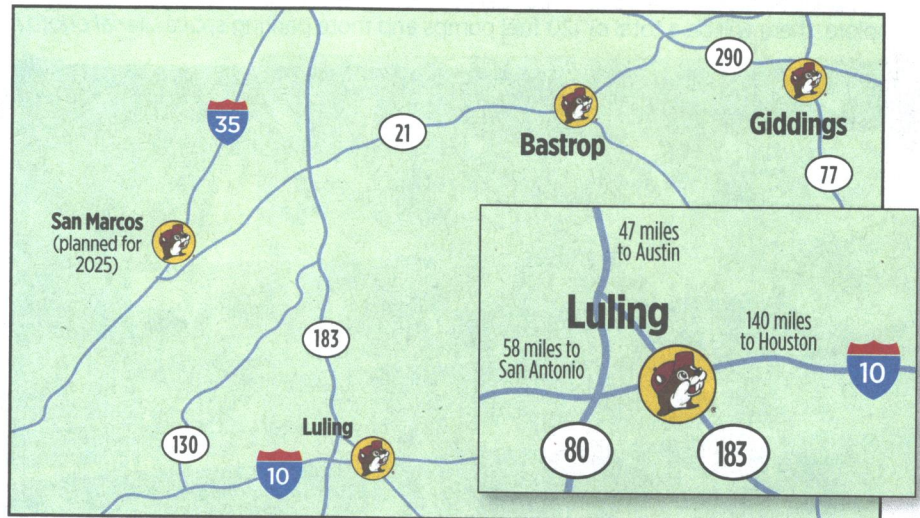
A simple formula has fueled Buc-ee's success: clean restrooms, friendly employees and inexpensive gas at lots of pumps. The company's success has grown thanks to word of mouth, fans' social media posts, enthusiastic news accounts and witty billboards that strategically dot highways leading to the stores.

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 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

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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.

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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.”

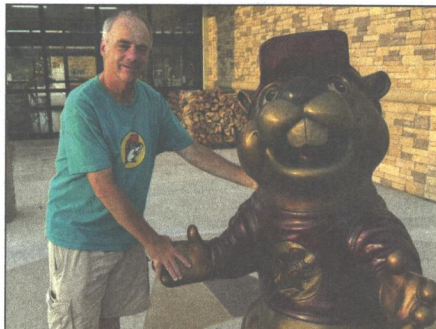
Luling Mayor CJ Watts said the travel center gives the city a big economic boost. Between Buc-ee's and several other fast-

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.” ■