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Tom Uhlman / Bloomberg News

Kroger officials say they expect an increase in business as Farmer Jack stores close.

Job seekers line up for 3,000 Kroger positions

Eric Morath and Jennifer Youssef / The Detroit News

Advertisement

LIVONIA -- Some 150 job seekers at a time waited in line this morning for at least two hours for a chance to land one of 3,000 jobs that the Kroger grocery chain is filling in Metro Detroit.

The Kroger Co. hiring spree is a move that analysts see as a precursor to the grocer acquiring as many as 25 soon-to-be closed Farmer Jack stores. Officials at Cincinnati-based Kroger are remaining mum on the prospect of taking over Farmer Jack locations, saying the jobs are being added at existing stores in response to the uptick in business the company anticipates as its one-time chief

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Detroit rival shuts down.

Kroger spokesman Dale Hollandsworth said today he wasn't certain how many had gone through the line by 10:30 a.m., but he would take a tally at about midday.

The Greater Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co., or A&P, announced it will sell off or close its 66 Farmer Jack stores in southeastern Michigan on or before July 7. Speculation has swirled that Kroger is looking to acquire some of the Metro Detroit Farmer Jacks, but Hollandsworth called such talk "rumors" and said the retailer wouldn't address them.

"This is fabulous," Hollandsworth said of the turnout of job candidates today at the grocer's Livonia distribution center. The grocer will continue to take applications at the center through next Wednesday.

Two of those in line were Farmer Jack workers Brian Grob and Brandon Chaffin.

Grob, 31, of Dearborn Heights has been a part-time stocker at the Taylor Farmer Jack for the past five years, making \$10.30 an hour. He is looking for any Kroger job that will pay enough so he can keep his weekend gig as a musician and Buddy Holly impersonator.

Asked about the long wait, Grob said: "If I can wait in line for the Magnum Roller Coaster at Cedar Point, this is really not a big deal."

Brandon Chaffin, 25, of Macomb Township has worked part time at the Shelby Township Farmer Jack as a stocker and clerk for nine years. He would like a full-time job of any kind with Kroger, but, he said, "I take whatever I can get, with the economy so bad."

He said he already had applied online and at different Kroger stores, but hadn't gotten a response yet. He's nervous about the prospect of being out of a job, but is counting on his past experience with Farmer Jack to land him a Kroger position.

Beginning Friday, Kroger will interview selected applicants at various sites around Metro Detroit, Hollandsworth said. He said interviews will continue, even on the weekend, until Kroger fills the jobs.

Big demand for work

If past calls for job candidates are any indication, Kroger's invitation is bound to attract thousands of applicants, as the downtrodden Michigan economy is ripe with job seekers. Kroger jobs could be especially attractive; earlier this month, its unionized work force ratified a new contract with increased wages and better health benefits. A retail analyst and union leader both speculated that Kroger



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How to apply

Kroger has set up the following system for applicants:

Fill out an application at:

www.kroger.com/careers.htm

Arrive at Kroger's Livonia distribution center at 12701 Middle Belt for an interview.


Bring photo identification.

Interviews will be from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m., starting this morning and continuing until June 27.

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wouldn't undertake such a mass hire -- a 23 percent increase in its Michigan headcount -- just to add staff at its existing 118 stores in the state. Kroger now employs about 13,000 in Michigan.

"They are adding jobs so they can expand into new stores," said Ken Dalto, a Farmington Hills retail analyst. "Kroger's customer service is not that poor that they would need to add significantly to their current stores."

Dalto anticipates Kroger will acquire 10 to 15 Farmer Jack stores.

The public recruiting for job candidates, complete with newspaper ads that say "Now Hiring in Michigan," is as likely intended to make local consumers feel good about Kroger during tough economic times as it is to attract talent, Dalto said.

"Kroger hires companies to find them workers," he said. "They don't need to advertise like this but they want to show they are the market leader and that they are investing in Michigan."

Hiller's Markets, Hollywood Markets and Spartan Stores, along with Kroger, have been mentioned as possible buyers of some Farmer Jack stores, but none have announced specific plans. Companies who filed bids for Farmer Jack stores signed non-disclosure agreements.

1,000 apply online

Kroger officials insisted Tuesday that the new workers will take jobs at existing stores that are seeing more business as Farmer Jack's shelves become empty.

"This will create an influx of business at our stores it's already happening," Hollandsworth said. "People need a place to buy milk, bread and eggs. As Farmer Jack liquidates, those items may already be out of stock."

Kroger prepared more than 30 interview rooms and set up computers for online applications at its distribution center as it braces for thousands of job seekers. Candidates are asked to apply online before they arrive -- and more than 1,000 people have already done so by Tuesday.

Among those Kroger may be looking to attract are the 4,800 union workers who will lose their Farmer Jack jobs next month. Neither Kroger nor union officials could say what, if any, seniority and benefits workers might carry over from one company to another.

Rick Blocker, secretary/treasurer at the United Food and Commercial Workers Local Union 876, welcomed the news that Kroger is hiring, but said he can't see the grocer adding 3,000 workers unless it is able to purchase Farmer Jack locations.

"We'd love for them to hire 3,000, but they don't have purchase agreement yet on 20 Farmer Jack stores," he said. "Until they get purchase agreement, it's premature to say what they'll do."

Workers in the dark

In the meantime, Farmer Jack workers are dealing with uncertainty.

An employee at a Rochester Hills Farmer Jack said Troy-based Hollywood Markets distributed applications to workers Friday, in anticipation that the Rochester Road store would become a Hollywood property. Workers at several other locations said they have been told their store would be purchased by Kroger.

The Rochester Hills worker, who asked that his name not be used, said he and many co-workers were uncertain if they'll seek jobs with other grocers until they find out how their pay and benefits will change with a new company. He said employees are frustrated at the lack of information. Blocker, a former Farmer Jack employee, understands workers' feelings.

"They gave up concessions twice and did everything they could to help the company survive," he said. "But A&P still wants to pull out of this market."

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