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John M. Galloway Special to The Detroit News

Job hopefuls line up for Kroger jobs in Livonia on Wednesday. The chain expects to hire 3,000 people.

Kroger snags 20 prime Farmer Jacks

Joel J. Smith and Jennifer Youssef / The Detroit News

Advertisement

The Kroger Co. will buy 20 Farmer Jack supermarkets in prime locations in southeast Michigan, cementing its hold on the region's competitive food market.

The Cincinnati-based grocer, which announced the deal Wednesday, is purchasing the stores for an undisclosed amount of money from the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co.

A&P said in March that it was selling or closing its 66 Farmer Jack stores in Michigan to focus its attention on its operations in the Northeast.

The news ends weeks of speculation about how many stores Kroger would purchase from

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its rival grocery chain. Final papers have yet to be signed, but Kroger officials hope to take over the stores by the end of this month or early July. The grocery chain Wednesday began taking applications for 3,000 jobs as it prepares to grow in Michigan.

The fate of the remaining 46 Farmer Jack stores, most of them in Metro Detroit, is unknown. A&P, which bought the chain in 1989, has said it wants to sell or shutter the stores by July 7. Besides Kroger, other prospective buyers mentioned include Hiller's, Hollywood, Spartan Stores and independent grocers.

While the 20 stores Kroger will purchase are scattered around southeast Michigan, it's clear that the grocer was only interested in those in prime locations, such as Bloomfield Township, Dearborn and Troy. The company is not buying either of the two Farmer Jack stores in Detroit.

"I figured Kroger's would pick all the cherries," said David J. Livingston, managing partner of DJL Research, a supermarket consultant in Pewaukee, Wis. "That's what happens when you have a lot of money. You end up getting the best stores."

With Kroger's increased market presence in southeast Michigan, the chain could attract even more customers who prefer the traditional supermarket concept over big box stores like Meijer or Costco or specialty markets, analysts said.

"(Those stores) will have more competition with better capital and a sense of merchandising than they ever had before," said Kenneth Dalto, a Farmington Hills-based retail analyst.

"This is a strategic plan to head off competition from these box stores and special markets so the Kroger chain doesn't end up like the next Farmer Jack chain, which was run down, under capitalized, old and tired," Dalto said.

Kroger relishes expansion

Kroger spokesman Dale Hollandsworth said the company looks forward to expanding its Michigan operations to 138 stores.

"I'm sure our real estate group has worked very hard on this and got the very best locations they could acquire," he said. "While we don't have a defined date for opening all the stores, we expect it to be very immediate."

He said it was not immediately clear whether Kroger would close any existing stores because of this purchase.

Kroger will interview employees from those stores for possible jobs, Hollandsworth said.

"Farmer Jack has an excellent reputation," he said. "They built a giant here in Detroit. I'm sure they have some very experienced employees that anybody would be happy to hire."

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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 Middlebelt for an interview.

Bring photo identification.

Applications will be taken from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. today through next Wednesday.

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That was welcome news for the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 876, which represents 4,800 Farmer Jack workers.

"It's great news," said Rick Blocker, secretary/treasurer of Local 876, which also represents Kroger workers. "We're excited about it. It will be a win-win for the employees and Kroger. We have a lot of employees that have experience and will be an asset to Kroger's. Kroger's can hit the ground running."

Workers ponder their fate

Kroger was mum about the Farmer Jack purchase Tuesday, even after publishing a full-page newspaper advertisement announcing that it will hire 3,000 workers and would start taking applications Wednesday at its distribution center in Livonia. Analysts saw the move as a precursor to the acquisition of Farmer Jack stores.

Blocker said that Kroger would continue the hiring blitz in Livonia through next Wednesday, as well as open up two other interview sites in Imlay City and Algonac.

Kroger on Tuesday said the 3,000 new workers were needed to handle the expected increase in business with the closing of the Farmer Jack chain. Now, with the purchase of 20 stores, that number will increase by a couple hundred workers, Hollandsworth said.

Farmer Jack employees were elated over the hiring news.

"I have a little peace of mind knowing that I'm probably going to keep my job," said Bonnie Pingitore, 52, a deli clerk at the Roseville store who has worked for the grocer for 33 years. "The time to look for a job is not 33 years later."

Victor Janis of Garden City wasn't as optimistic about keeping his job as a stocker at one of the Dearborn stores. He believes workers will be transferred from a Kroger store a mile away.

"The union isn't giving (workers) assurance that our jobs are safe," said Janis, 48, who has worked at Farmer Jack for seven years.

"They didn't assure us of anything."

Hopefuls try to get aboard

Luella Evans was among the hundreds of unemployed Metro Detroit workers -- including some Farmer Jack employees -- who lined up outside the distribution center on Wednesday, waiting for at least two hours to try to snag one of the Kroger jobs.

"This is fabulous," Hollandsworth said of the turnout. He said that from 8-11:30 a.m., 425 applicants had been interviewed. Wednesday's interviews were to continue until 7 p.m.

Evans, 30, of Detroit who has worked at the Sterling Heights Farmer Jack for seven years as a cashier, was hopeful Kroger would find her skills valuable enough to hire her, but she knew she was up against stiff competition.

"It's really hard to find a job right now," she said. "All I can do is hope they pick me."

Richard Uhl of Redford, a former Farmer Jack employee, was at the distribution center at 10 a.m. to apply for a management position. "I know the business," said 53-year-old Uhl, who managed a Farmer Jack for 12 years before losing his job in a downsizing five years ago.

Brian Grob of Dearborn Heights, 31, is a part-time night stocker at the Farmer Jack in Taylor. He wants to have a job lined up at Kroger before his Farmer Jack job disappears next month.

Grob, who plays the drums and is a Buddy Holly impersonator by night, didn't seem to mind waiting in a long line outside the distribution plant.

"If I can wait in line for the Magnum (roller coaster) at Cedar Point," he said, "this is really not a big deal."

Farmer Jack employees weren't the only ones applying for Kroger jobs. Paul Bobeal was working at a CVS pharmacy as a stocker before he was laid off a few months ago. The job loss

has left him unable to pay his bills and take care of his 1-year-old son.

"I'll do anything," the 21-year-old Detroit man said. "I gotta get a job to support myself and my kid."

You can reach Joel J. Smith at (313) 222-2556 or at jsmith@detnews.com.

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