

The Shelby Report's 2025 Southeast Retailer of the Year



2025 SOUTHEAST RETAILER OF THE YEAR

Publix Super Markets expands Kentucky presence with ‘55 model’ prototype

Publix Super Markets, *The Shelby Report of the Southeast’s* 2025 Retailer of the Year, is continuing its expansion into Kentucky with the opening of another store – part of a new market for the Florida-based grocer but one CEO Kevin Murphy says is already exceeding expectations.



The second Lexington store, which opened June 4, is located at the Fountains at Palomar, 3855 Fountainblue Lane. Publix entered Kentucky – its eighth state – in 2023 and now has four locations open. Six stores are expected to be operating by the end of 2025, with 16 sites announced.

“We don’t have a certain number of stores in mind. We know that Kentucky is a great state ... Our response from Kentucky so far has been overwhelming and positive,” Murphy said.



Kevin Murphy

Charlotte Division VP Joey Riddle, whose division includes the Kentucky stores, added that Publix is active in a community for several months before opening a store. He also noted that many customers were familiar with the brand from vacations to Florida and down the East Coast.

That familiarity has drawn shoppers from outside Kentucky as well.



Joey Riddle

“They are really enjoying the experience.”

People as differentiator

Kroger and Meijer are key competitors in Kentucky, but Murphy said there’s room for everybody.

“Competition is good for the customer and helps keep everybody on their toes,” he said. “It helps keep everybody offering the best service and the best prices we can, so we’re good with that.”

Riddle said Publix, which is celebrating its 95th anniversary this year, focuses on what it can control.

“Everybody has a box to sell groceries out of, but when it comes down to what sets us apart, we like to invest in our people,” he said. “When we give our associates what they deserve and create a great place for them to work, they’re naturally going to be happy at work and give a great experience to the customer.”

“We really go after the experience, paired with the best quality product that we can have in every prototype that we have across our footprint. Our huge investment in the people pays off long term. We believe that the people are what makes the experience.”

Publix, an employee-owned company, reported sales of nearly \$60 billion in 2024. Murphy said they don’t talk about specific goals but rather focus on encouraging associates to “go to business every day, to really focus on beating yesterday,

beating last week, last month, last year and continuing to grow.”

Murphy linked growth to career opportunities, noting Publix’s status as the largest employee-owned company in the United States, with more than 260,000 associates.



Management team at new Publix in Lexington Kentucky

“The reason we want to grow is that promise that we’ve given to every one of our associates that you can come here, you can have a career at Publix. You can achieve your personal best at Publix, and you can become an owner,” he said.

“We want people to know that you can come here at any age, but you can come here at a very early age and build a very lucrative, prosperous, rewarding, fulfilling career. And we’ll teach you everything that you need to know. You’ve just got to be willing to come in and work hard, have the right attitude, the right amount of energy and then put the effort into it. You can be very, very successful at Publix.

“But in order for us to keep that promise ... we’ve got to be able to grow and continue to grow. We’ve got to be able to reward people with promotion from within and that opportunity to advance, that opportunity to grow themselves, and just the natural, organic growth that really helps us be able to do that.”

Store prototypes

Murphy noted the newest Lexington store is a more recent prototype in the company’s portfolio, the “55 model.” At 55,000 square feet, it is larger than the company’s typical 45,000-46,000-square-foot footprint but is designed to stay manageable for shoppers.



Publix’s Kevin Murphy and Joey Riddle with Stephanie Reid, *The Shelby Report*

“We’ve been playing around with this prototype for probably about the last three years or so,” Murphy said during a store tour with *The Shelby Report* the day before the June 4 opening. “We currently have about seven active prototypes within our portfolio.”

The various prototypes allow flexibility for specific locations. Murphy noted the 55 model has turned out well and the company is receiving “exceptional responses from our customers with this prototype.”

“We just try and focus on what we believe makes shopping easy, makes it convenient, makes sense to the customer on location and identification of items or where things may be located,” he said.

Part of the newest Lexington store design is the “Pours” area, where customers can order custom smoothies, acai

bowls and, in some states, beer or wine on tap. In Kentucky, wine sales are restricted to separate liquor stores, but the space still draws crowds with local brewery partnerships and events.



“We do a lot of local events ... and invite our customers in on that,” Murphy said. “It’s been very successful, getting a lot of very good feedback.”

The prepared foods “deli island” separates service counters into stations for sushi and ramen, pizza and pasta, with custom pizzas as an option. A burrito bar also is available, which Murphy said is very popular.

He noted the service island is separate from the traditional deli to facilitate traffic flow.

The traditional deli features Boar’s Head meats, salads, Publix’s “famous” fried chicken and hot sides. Murphy said Kentucky shoppers have embraced the chain’s signature offerings.



“When we open up tomorrow morning, they’ll be waiting to come in and get the fried chicken, and there’ll be a line of people just waiting for Pub subs.”

In the produce department, Murphy noted that these days produce can be center of the plate for many people.

“A lot of people are very, very knowledgeable now about what they’re eating and how they’re eating, and produce tends to be one of the most important parts of their meal,” he said. “We are very proud of our produce departments.”



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Publix prioritizes sourcing produce from U.S. farms first, moving with the seasons.

“From Florida first, or from Georgia or South Carolina. And then as the seasons move, we move with that season, and we follow it farther north,” Murphy said.

He noted customer expectations have shifted. “Think back when you were growing up – strawberries had a season. There’s no season for strawberries anymore. Customers expect strawberries 12 months a year, so you have to continuously move and be able to acquire that product and have it for customers.”



Murphy also pointed out the salad bar and hot bar, which are features in the “55 model” prototype store, along with a large kettle corn station.

“It’s been a great sandbox,” he said of the prototype. “We’re still making small adjustments. What we utilize in this prototype we already know is very successful, but it does give us the opportunity to test new things and experiment with new things.”



He said they didn’t know how well the kettle corn station would go over, but “it’s been very popular. It’s been a lot of fun.”

Murphy also acknowledged that the different store prototypes allow the company to “put efficiencies together” and work with different structures and layouts.

“Everything about Publix is quality, and we want everything to be fresh and the highest quality possible,” he said. “The utilization of the outer walls and the back of the house and the space behind that is critical.”

Some of the prototypes have the bakery in the corner, while others have the meat or produce department located there.

“That lets us test some things and really hear from our customers on what they like and what they prefer,” Murphy said.

The new Lexington store also has a pharmacy with a drive-thru. He noted that the availability of a pharmacy drive-thru in other stores depends on space and the shopping center layout, but the company offers that service whenever it can.

“It’s all about convenience for the customer,” Murphy said. “Sometimes the customer is sick or has sick children or a sick family member and doesn’t want to leave the vehicle. That’s a benefit to them to be able to do that.”

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Building partnerships

Looking ahead

"We want to make sure that we're able to serve all the communities within Kentucky," he said. "With the response that we're getting, we're excited. We think there's a lot more work to be done."



- ◆ **Lexington** – The Fountains at Palomar, 3901 Harrodsburg Road (open); Citation Point, 1952 Stockton Way (open); and at Romany and Duke roads (planned)
- ◆ **Louisville** – 2500 Terra Crossing Blvd. (open); 100 Flat Rock Road (open); 10005 Ballardsville Road, (under construction); and at Blakenbaker Parkway and Shelbyville Road (announced)
- ◆ **Georgetown** – Elkhorn Village Center, at Frankfort Road and McClelland Circle (announced)
- ◆ **Hardin County** – at Pear Orchard and Ring roads, Elizabethtown (announced)
- ◆ **Northern Kentucky** – Triple Crown Shopping Center, at Triple Crown Boulevard and Richwood Road, Walton (open); Cold Spring Pointe, at AA Highway 9 and Alexandria Pike, Cold Spring (announced); Farmview Commons, at U.S. 42 and Farmview Drive, Florence (announced); at Harris and Madison pikes, Independence (announced); and The Shoppes at Hebron Pointe, at Williams Road and Worldwide Boulevard, Hebron (announced)
- ◆ **Owensboro** – Gateway Common, at Pleasant Valley and Hayden roads (announced); and Yellow Banks Square, at Carter Road and West Parrish Avenue (announced)



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Publix through the decades

Across 95 years, Publix has grown into one of the biggest supermarket companies in the country. But how did it get here?

1930s – Where it all began

On Sept. 6, 1930, George Jenkins opened the first Publix location, known then as Publix Food Store, in Winter Haven, Florida. Today, that brick-and-mortar building still stands and is a part of the National Register of Historic Places. By 1935, Jenkins opened his second location on the opposite side of Winter Haven.



1940s – Publix Super Market is born

In 1940, Jenkins expanded Publix Food Store into the supermarket of his dreams in Winter Haven. This store boasted an art deco design and was known as a “state-of-the-art food palace of marble, glass and stucco.” By the end of the decade, there were 20 locations.



1950s – Begins selling private-label items

The art deco store designs of the '40s carried into the '50s. With the new decade came the introduction of Publix-branded items. By the end of the decade, Publix stores spanned the state of Florida with 55 locations and nearly 3,000 associates. A new 125,000-square-foot warehouse and office complex opened in Lakeland, Florida.



One of the most notable stores from the 1950s was at the Southgate Shopping Center in Lakeland, which is still a Publix. This store featured the first Publix Danish Bakery. The iconic midcentury Southgate arch in the middle of the shopping center was used as a backdrop for the movie “Edward Scissorhands” in the 1990s.

1960s – 100 stores and counting

During this decade, the design of Publix stores changed from the art deco architecture of the 1940s to a winged design created by famed Florida architect Donovan Dean. Centered in the wings were neon lights that blinked downward.

At night, the lights looked like a flowing waterfall. Publix hit a milestone of 100 stores, reaching 150 by the end of the decade, with 8,000 associates. The company also added the delicatessen department and opened its first distribution facility in Miami.



1970s – Advancements in technology

In the 1970s, the design for the stores’ exterior signage changed from wings and neon lights to a squared “P” with the word “Publix” spelled out. In 1972, the company built a bakery plant in Lakeland.

Three years later, stores welcomed a new department called the Photo Lab. Publix was the first grocery chain to have scanning at its registers in all stores, replacing the keypunch registers in the late 1970s. By the end of the decade, Publix had 231 stores and 26,000 associates.

The Lake Miriam Square Publix in Lakeland opened as a different Publix format known as Food World in the 1970s. With just 23 locations in central Florida by the end of the decade, the stores had a different look and pricing structure. They featured a giant rotating globe out front and associates wore blue uniforms. In 1985, the Lake Miriam Square Food World transitioned into a Publix.



1980s – 50th anniversary

In 1980, Publix celebrated its 50th anniversary and opened a new dairy plant. In 1986, the company opened its 300th store and the first Publix Pharmacy. By the end of 1989, the company had 367 stores and 62,000 associates.

In 1982, Publix created the Presto! Network, an electronic funds transfer system, which brought Automated Teller Machine (ATM) services to customers.

In 1984, the company expanded the Presto! Network to run debit transactions at its point-of-sale systems during checkout. This allowed the grocer to support transactions from financial institutions that were members of the Presto! Network and increased the overall value of the service.

1990s – Carrying on Mr. George’s legacy



Uniforms and store interiors changed in the 1990s, featuring coral and teal colors. In 1991, mascot Plato the Publixaurus debuted.

The company expanded outside Florida, opening its first Publix across state lines in Savannah, Georgia, in 1991.

On April 8, 1996, founder George Jenkins died at age 88. However, the Publix team was dedicated to continuing his legacy and keeping his philosophies alive within the company.



By the end of the decade, Publix had expanded into South Carolina and Alabama. By the end of the century, the company had opened its 500th store, located in Miami, and had 614 stores and some 120,000 associates.

2000s – New millennium

The 2000s were years of growth for Publix, rolling out the first Aprons kiosks in 2000 and the first cooking school in 2001. In 2002, the company expanded to Tennessee and in 2003, the first Publix Liquors opened.

Publix celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2005 and opened its 1,000th store, located in St. Augustine, Florida. By the end of the decade, the company had 1,014 stores and more than 140,000 associates.



2010s – Concepts lead to additional growth

Publix technology evolved in the 2010s with the addition of its mobile app and social media networks. Stores made their way into North Carolina in 2014 and Virginia in 2017.

For the 20th time, Publix was named one of *Fortune's* 100 best companies to work for in 2017, earning the company recognition as one of the Great Place to Work Legends.



2020s – Keys to Kentucky

Publix opened its first store in Louisville on Jan. 10, 2024. The store’s features include a drive-thru Publix Pharmacy and an adjacent Publix Liquors, which was the company’s first outside of Florida.

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‘Publix will take care of you’ – opportunities aplenty for associates of all ages

At Publix Super Markets, ownership isn’t just a financial arrangement – it’s a mindset that leaders say has fueled the grocer’s success for 95 years.

As the largest employee-owned company in the U.S., Publix has more than 260,000 associates across eight states. Each has the opportunity to become an owner through the company’s employee stock ownership plan, a legacy of founder George Jenkins’ vision that those who helped build the business should share in its success.

“We’re so fortunate because we’re associate owned, and these associates at Publix really do think like owners and act like owners. That’s really special,” said Kevin Murphy, CEO.

“They take care of not only the facility and the product and the quality of the product, but they take care of customers like they’re family members or friends. You really can’t do that unless you feel like you own it.”

Murphy said Publix, *The Shelby Report of the Southeast’s* 2025 Retailer of the Year, works hard to help associates learn what ownership means – both in terms of benefits and in responsibility.

“Sometimes it’s a little hard for people to understand or comprehend,” he said. “So we do a lot around our benefit statements and have conversations to help [associates] understand our employee stock ownership plan.”



At a glance

- Here are a few facts about Publix Super Markets.
- ◆ Founded in 1930 in Winter Haven, Florida, by George W. Jenkins.
 - ◆ Largest employee-owned company in the United States.
 - ◆ One of the 10 largest-volume supermarket chains in the country. Retail sales in 2024 reached \$59.7 billion.
 - ◆ Employs more than 260,000 people.
 - ◆ Received numerous awards for being a great place to shop and work.

Building careers

Like many of Publix’s leaders, Murphy started his career bagging groceries. He was 14 at the time, working after school and saving for a car.

“I’m still saving for a car. It’s just a little bit different car now,” he said with a laugh.

“I loved what I did, loved the people I worked with and being in the stores, and [loved] the idea of being able to merchandise a display and stand back and be able to see the immediate gratification of a job well done,” he said. “I worked with a lot of managers that were very inspiring, very motivating.”

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Legacy of service, shared success

Publix Super Markets was founded in 1930 by George Jenkins, who opened his first store in Winter Haven, Florida, during the Great Depression.

Jenkins, known as “Mr. George,” believed that employees should share in the company’s profits and success. He pioneered the idea of giving ownership to associates, a practice that became the foundation for Publix’s employee stock ownership plan (ESOP) today.

He also was unafraid of competition. When he left his job managing a Piggly Wiggly to open his own store, he built it just two doors down. He even stayed on to introduce the new manager to the community.

“And you know where the customers went,” said Marcy Benton, VP of associate experience. “Of course, the one with the service.”

Director of Communications Maria Brous said Jenkins’ lessons from that era still guide Publix today.

“So many of the things we talk about now, he talked about then,” she said. “He knew customers benefit most from competition. It was about making everything better. And it was always about relationships.”

From the beginning, Jenkins emphasized treating shoppers as valued customers, not just transactions. That philosophy remains central to Publix’s culture, passed down through generations of leaders and associates who own their part of the company.



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Murphy said he wasn’t sure what he wanted to do for a career while in high school, but Publix provided the opportunities and motivation to grow.

“The one great thing that we do at Publix is, if you do a good job, we’re going to continue to give you responsibility, and we’re going to give you more work to do,” he said. “So I didn’t have a whole lot of time to think; they just kept giving me more work to do, and then they kept giving me more responsibility.”

“And I said, ‘Well, I really like what I’m doing. I guess I might as well do this for a little bit and see if it works out.’ And so far, it’s worked out pretty good.”

Charlotte Division VP Joey Riddle has a similar story. He was 16 when his mother pulled into a Publix parking lot and told him to go inside and apply.

“I always joke that it’s the job I got that I never applied for,” Riddle said. “My mom pulled up to the front of the store and got me out of the car, and I never left. Thirty years later, I’m still here.”

Like Murphy, Riddle found opportunity in responsibility.

“Any job you start is just that – it’s a job,” he said. “But then when you enjoy the people you’re with, you’re treated with respect, you’re surrounded by great leaders, it makes it not like going to work every day.”

“The opportunities are there for you. Just come in every day and enjoy what you do. Publix will take care of you.”

Both leaders said having “come up through the ranks” gives them a special connection to associates working at the store level today.

“I think that is what makes us maybe a little bit more relatable, that we did those jobs,” Riddle said. “There’s not a day that I’ll walk by and not tell them, ‘Your job is important. You’re not just punching buttons or putting groceries in a bag, because I did that 30 years ago. And the opportunities are there for you.’”

Murphy agreed. He said people often look at a grocery store and don’t understand the complexity involved in getting the product to the shelf and, in Publix’s case, doing that in eight states. He noted the company also has 10 different warehouses and 10 different manufacturing plants.

“There’s just a plethora of jobs and opportunity within Publix, whether it’s in the stores or whether it’s in our manufacturing plants, our distribution warehouses or whether it’s in support areas behind the scenes,” Murphy said.

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He said the company shares that information with its associates, adding that many start out in the stores and end up in other jobs outside of retail.

“The real opportunity is that you can come to Publix and have a career and achieve your personal best,” Murphy said. “For me, it’s all about inspiration and motivation. It’s all about helping people be able to see what their potential is and then helping them achieve their personal best.”

“At Publix, we give them the opportunity to do it. We’re going to show you everything you need to know, build your confidence and help you succeed.”

Culture of growth, support

Helping associates grow is a top priority for Publix leadership.

Marcy Benton, VP of associate experience, said the company’s career development process is designed to be transparent and supportive.

“All of our positions are posted; the career paths and all of that information is there,” Benton said. “One of the things we really believe in is being very transparent in our communications.”

She said associates can express interest in different jobs throughout their career with Publix, and the company can start developing them for those positions.

The company also invests heavily in internal career fairs, where leaders visit stores to talk with associates about opportunities and help them plan their careers.

Benton said the expression of interest process has been in place since the 1990s.

“It gives all 260,000 associates an opportunity to let us know what they’re interested in ... Then we’re able to look at that list and start developing them for those positions.”

She said the company has very defined requirements before registering interest in another one.

“We use all of that information to make sure that we are promoting in accordance with those who are interested and eligible for those positions,” Benton said. “It’s a very detailed and defined process, and I love it because it takes the guesswork out of it.”

This process ensures they are working with associates who want to advance and make sure they are ready when that opportunity becomes available.

Not only does this benefit the associates but also the company.

“The biggest thing that will hinder our ability to grow is Publix people not being ready,” Benton

Locations and more

Publix Super Markets has 1,413 locations:

- ◆ Alabama (96 stores)
- ◆ Florida (882 stores)
- ◆ Georgia (220 stores)
- ◆ Kentucky (five stores)
- ◆ North Carolina (58 stores)
- ◆ South Carolina (70 stores)
- ◆ Tennessee (59 stores)
- ◆ Virginia (24 stores)

10 distribution centers:

- ◆ Boynton Beach, Florida
- ◆ Dacula, Georgia
- ◆ Deerfield Beach, Florida
- ◆ Greensboro, North Carolina

- ◆ Jacksonville, Florida
- ◆ Lakeland, Florida
- ◆ McCalla, Alabama
- ◆ Miami, Florida
- ◆ Orlando, Florida
- ◆ Sarasota, Florida

10 manufacturing facilities:

- ◆ Atlanta, Georgia (bakery plant)
- ◆ Dacula, Georgia (dairy plant)
- ◆ Deerfield Beach, Florida (dairy plant, fresh kitchen)
- ◆ Lakeland, Florida (bakery plant, dairy plant, deli kitchen, fresh kitchen, printing services)
- ◆ Orlando, Florida (produce, snacks)

said. “None of us want that to happen on our watch.”

She said Publix hosts internal career fairs, where teams will visit each location, have conversations with associates and encourage them.

“We really spend time talking to them about their careers, all the opportunities and helping them plan how to get there,” Benton said. “There’s no greater value than the ability we have to invest in each other.”

Benton added her belief that Jenkins, known as “Mr. George,” was a visionary. “He had something unique and special. When you think about owning something, you take better care of it ... And I think that’s the same thing when we come to any Publix store. This whole company is ours, and we have to work together. I think that’s why ‘One Publix. One Purpose’ resonated so well.”

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She noted that the company works hard to make sure all associates feel valued and appreciated. Benton said that culture comes from Jenkins himself, who distinguished between “employees” and “associates” because of the ownership mindset. She uses a video to welcome new store managers, where Mr. George talks about the difference in relationships.

“He talks about the difference between a shopper and a customer,” Benton said. “In his words, he’s saying that a shopper sometimes is going to go from competitor to competitor, [whoever] has the lowest price at that time. But a customer, if treated properly, has a relationship and is going to keep coming back.”

Maria Brous, director of communications, said relationships are at the heart of Publix’s culture. She said many associates have the same story, that “somebody probably saw something in us and prompted us to do something more than where we thought we were going ... Even though there are so many associates, we get to know our people. We build relationships, we get to understand what drives them, and we see things in them. We see them for their strengths ... Somebody did it for me, so it’s my responsibility to do it for someone else.”

Brous said the combination of opportunity and ownership keeps associates with Publix long term. “Why would you go anyplace else?” she said. “Marcy’s been here 33 years, I’m 35 ... It’s one of those things where time flies when you’re having fun. Mr. George got it right – you’re in the people business. You just happen to sell groceries.”

Ownership is key

For Publix leaders, ownership is both the foundation and the future. Associates become eligible for ownership after 90 days and are fully vested after three years. From there, many spend their entire careers with the grocer.

Jared Glover, media relations manager, had been working with one of his counterparts in Kentucky a year or so before the first store opened in that new market. They met with community and media partners to talk about Publix and what differentiates it from other grocers.

“That ownership part really was something that stuck for a lot of our partners and community leaders. They really honed in on that,” he said. “Those are things that really mean a lot to me as an associate but sets us apart from other competitors in the area.”

Murphy said the model reflects Jenkins’ original vision of shared success. “I’m really proud to be a part of the Publix team, and I’m proud of what our associates do day in and day out to live up to that Publix reputation that we have,” Murphy said.



Jared Glover

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As Publix celebrates its 95th anniversary this year, many are reflecting on the company’s beginnings and the hard work that has propelled it to the success it enjoys today.

Murphy gives the credit to Jenkins and his dream of being able to “operate a better store and to be able to treat his customers like kings and queens. And to be able to think about the wisdom that one individual had back in the very first store, to be able to say, ‘I want everyone to have skin in the game, so I’m going to give you a part of this business. I’m going to let you share in the profits of this business. So as successful as this store will be, you will be more successful as well.’

“And he gave away his profits. That’s what our employee stock ownership plan is today, where Publix continues to give profits back to our associates so that they have the opportunity to benefit. The better Publix does and the healthier Publix is, the better that they’re going to do as well.”

Benton agreed. “This whole company is ours, and we have to work together,” she said. “It’s up to all of us to make sure we continue to polish it up, to shine it.”

As Publix looks ahead to its next 95 years, leaders say ownership will remain its defining feature.

“I couldn’t be more proud of our Publix culture,” Murphy said. “It’s very unique, and we’re very protective of it.”



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‘A place for everyone’ – grocer offers sense of family, belonging, career paths

When Marcy Benton walked into Publix for what she thought would be a summer job while in graduate school, she didn’t expect to find a lifelong career.

After all, it seemed as though her entire hometown of Lakeland, Florida, worked for the company, and she wanted to escape the familiar for a bigger city.



Marcy Benton

“They worked around the school schedule, which is very accommodating. And then after I finished graduate school, I decided I’d stay one more year, because they were really nice to me. See how this works?” Benton asked with a laugh.

Then, on what she thought was her last day with Publix, she was called into a meeting with two executives.

“They sat me down for 45 minutes and did nothing but talk to me about their careers at Publix and all of the opportunities ... They were there to ask me to change my mind and just give it a chance,” Benton said.

She moved from accounting into human resources at that point, and after nearly 33 years with the company, she now serves as VP of associate experience. Much like her own journey, Benton said many associates who come to Publix for a temporary job find a career instead.

“I think there’s so many people like myself that think Publix is going to be this place that we stop by, and then what happens is we run into people that invest in us,” she said. “We end up being able to open our eyes and see what a magnificent company Publix is,” she said.

Purpose-driven culture

That sense of investment – people pouring into people – has been the company’s hallmark for nearly a century. From recruiting high school students to promoting store clerks into leadership, Publix has built a culture centered on careers, mentorship and belonging.

That culture inside its stores has led to the company’s success throughout the years.

Publix, founded in 1930 as a single Florida grocery store, has grown into the largest employee-owned supermarket chain in the United States, with more than 1,400 stores across eight states and over 260,000 associates.

That strong company culture is what allowed Publix to be a source of stability for communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Benton, whose team was tasked with leading Publix through the pandemic, said it was an eye-opening experience.

Giving people some sense of normalcy during such an uncertain time “really kind of defined that we’re more than a grocery store,” she said. “We’re part of that community.”

Benton noted that she always knew Publix was “an amazing company,” but the pandemic was “a huge, eye-opening experience when we think about purpose ... It’s being there for your community. It’s being there when others aren’t.”

Publix associates are the heart of that purpose and are what make the company stand out.

Maria Brous, director of communications, said the company’s reputation as a secure and stable employer is what draws people in, adding that Publix has never had a layoff.

“It’s the job security, it’s the ability to purchase stock, the ability to have a flexible schedule, the ability to grow, the ability to move and learn new skill sets, the ability to try different – it’s all of those things,” Brous said.

She went on to note that the focus on associates is “ingrained” in the company culture.

“We want our associates to know that ... we are one Publix with one purpose, that we care about them, and we always say we’re the largest family you’ll ever belong to,” she said.

According to Brous, the phrase “One Publix, One purpose” was introduced by Executive Chairman Todd Jones at a retail operations conference.

“It’s doing consistently what others aren’t willing to do ... It’s the pride and ownership. We’re all rowing in the same direction ... we’re all focusing on the same thing,” she said.

Benton said this commitment by Publix to its associates began with its founder, George W. Jenkins, known as “Mr. George.”

“One of the biggest things that I’m always reminded of is this company started because Mr. George had a bad experience with an employer, and that was the whole premise of him opening up Publix,” she said.

Jenkins was a store manager for Piggly Wiggly in the 1920s when he traveled to Georgia to



Maria Brous

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pitch ideas to the new owners. He was told they were “too busy” to see him, but he overheard them discussing their golf game while he waited.

“He drove back to Florida and opened up Publix and vowed that we’d never be too busy for our associates,” Benton said.

This vow continues today through several programs, including an open-door policy, associate appreciation visits and “Be There Day,” where corporate leaders work in a store or distribution facility.

“We go and we’re going to work in the deli, we’re going to work in the bakery,” Benton said. “We’re going to do all of those things because we never want to lose sight of the work that’s going on. We want to make sure that we are there and connected throughout the company.”

To ensure the company continues to meet the needs of its associates, Publix conducts an annual “associate voice survey.”

“We really focus on listening to our associates,” Benton said. “And when you talk about a survey with over 90 something percent response rate, it’s unheard of ... but it means that much to us.”

The survey gauges overall associate satisfaction along with a “mentoring index for recognition and coaching and advancement,” she said.

The most recent survey results showed improvements in all areas, including overall satisfaction with the work environment, management and advancement opportunities.

“We just got them yesterday, and we’re super excited,” Benton said. “Everything is going up, so we’re continuing to lean in. That’s important to us, that we never lose sight and that we’re hearing from all 260,000 associates about their experience here at Publix.”

She recalled a survey comment from a deli associate who wrote, “If somebody had told me four years ago that I’d be thinking about this deli team as my family, I wouldn’t have believed them.”

“It’s a matter of what our objective is but also ... we’re continuing to check the pulse to make sure that we’re delivering on what Mr. George intended, and we never lose sight of what this company was founded on,” Benton said.

Recruitment, opportunity

Publix has been on the *Fortune* 100 Best Companies to Work For list since its inception and was ranked No. 42 in 2024. Benton said while being on the list is wonderful, a positive work environment is more important.

Publix emphasizes building careers from within. The company recruits in high schools, colleges and local communities, encouraging young people to see Publix as more than just a first job.

“One of the best things we know is if we can get people early, then we can get them engaged, and we can find that great talent,” Benton said. “You can grow right here with Publix because we have a lot of training and development pieces.”

She added that customers who love the brand and the experience they have in the stores also provide a pool of potential employees. “It’s a big driver for us,” Benton said. “The flexible schedule is another one and the opportunities for growth.”

The company hosts summer internships at its corporate office with free housing and paid positions. The program, which started about 20 years ago with 12 interns, now hosts 72 students each summer. Brous said the internships expose students to all aspects of the grocery business,

from purchasing to supply chain and beyond.

Many of those interns eventually take on roles as managers, directors and leaders across the company.

“It’s really turned out to be a very fruitful program for us,” Benton said.

Brous noted that the interns get to experience the family atmosphere and sense of community engagement at Publix.

“They’re getting to know us, and that is really important,” Brous said. “They’re finding purpose and understanding that commitment of giving back.”

The company also has started a program in its newer markets that brings high school teachers from the local area to tour stores and distribution facilities during the summer.

“We talk to them about all the career opportunities at Publix ... And they’re able to talk to their students about this new community partner, Publix,” Benton said.

She added that for high school students who are Publix associates, they have an event called “A Night To Soar,” where they celebrate 11th and 12th graders and invite their parents to discuss tuition reimbursement and career opportunities.

Benton said they always are trying to make people aware of the opportunities and benefits of a career with Publix.

“I always call it the gift of Publix,” she said. “We were given this gift, but we’re always thinking about what else can we do to make sure that we’re continuing to put more in this gift, so when we pass it on for that next generation, it’s better than it was even given to us ... We’re always thinking about different ways we can expand the brand so people will know more about Publix.”

The company’s focus on its associates extends to its fleet of drivers. Benton said Publix trains and develops its own drivers and has avoided the labor shortages that have affected other companies. The company also has a system in place to ensure drivers are home at night.

“We’re very careful and watch, making sure they’re home at night,” Benton said. “And that’s a big, big deal to drivers.”

She said while there may be an occasional long-haul trip, most are day trips. They also have drop yards where a driver from Lakeland can meet a driver from Atlanta to swap so that both are back home for the night.

“We want to make sure that our drivers understand that we appreciate everything that they do,” Benton said.

Commitment to diversity, inclusion

Benton, who previously served as Publix’s diversity manager for more than 11 years, said the company has been “very intentional” about its efforts to support female and minority associates.

“We have contender programs where we’re looking for talent, we identify that talent, and we start training and developing and making sure that females and minorities are represented in every one of those stages as we’re going through the process,” she said.

“It’s nice to look around now and see the journey and where we are. We are still very committed to it. I think the beauty of it for us, unlike some other companies, is our message ... that we need everybody. In order for us to grow and continue to be successful, we need everybody dialed in to Publix and being part of this family.”

Publix also has worked to ensure the stores reflect the communities they are in.

“When we do our store openings, and when we look at our warehousing and distribution centers, we’re reflective of the community ... we’re intentional about those things,” Brous said. “We want the store team to also reflect the community and for them to find the similarities and to be able to build.”

The company also has a mentoring program. While it’s open to all associates, it was designed with women and minorities in mind.

“We’re a believer in everybody having equal access to opportunity, and so we certainly wanted to make sure that we were mentoring and developing. So we led with females and minorities, but it’s open to everybody,” Benton said. “It’s proven to be hugely successful.”

Benton recalled how during her career, “I had so many white males that invested in me. It really made a difference. When we were talking about creating mentoring programs, for me it was about making sure you had access to those who had the knowledge, who had the experience.

“My thought was all of those who took time in me that didn’t look like me, but they saw something in me and invested in me,” she said.

Establishing that program was important for Publix, Benton added. “It’s nice to see where we are. We’re not done yet ... but I’m proud of where we are as an organization. Super proud when I look back and see all of the intentional efforts – processes and systems – we put into place that have really continued to pay dividends. It’s really about making sure people know that they have access to all of the opportunities here with Publix and can grow with us.”

Brous said Publix is a place for everyone, noting their commitment to hiring older adults and associates who participate in Special Olympics as athletes. She said they have a range of associates from 14-95 years old.

“I think Publix is a place for everyone,” Brous said. “I think it’s one of those things where, for so many, it creates family, belonging, opportunity that they may not have otherwise and really a place where there’s community.”

She said they don’t track how many of their associates are Special Olympics athletes, but Special Olympics estimates the number is close to 900.

Brous recalled one story from a parent who expressed gratitude for the opportunity.



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2025 SOUTHEAST RETAILER OF THE YEAR

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“Thank you for the opportunity to provide this for my child,” Brous shared. “At the end of the day, you want to know that your child will be able to find sense of purpose and belonging, and after we’re gone, we want them to be able to know that they’re going to still have family.”

As for their senior associates, Benton said one of the first things you notice about older store associates is their smile.

“It’s a wonderful, wonderful thing,” she said. “It’s not something that we mandate at all. It just happens. The environment is the cause of that – people wanting to be part of something special and something that’s bigger than themselves at that point.”

She added with such a wide range of ages employed, they are always thinking about how to continue to engage with each of those groups, “which is always interesting.”

Benton said she loves to think about having an environment where a grandparent and grandchild can work in the same store.

“It’s always interesting to be able to get that group together, and you want to talk about just being the light of so many of our stores,” she said. “You walk in, and those smiles are so big. They’re certainly happy, and it’s a matter of coming to hang out with family and friends.”



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Sustainability, technology, loyalty evident throughout latest Lexington store

Walking the aisles of Publix’s newest Kentucky location in Lexington with *The Shelby Report* in early June, CEO Kevin Murphy spoke with pride – and a forward-looking edge – about how the 95-year-old grocer is adapting to changing technology, sustainability demands and customer expectations.



“We’ve got a number of sustainability initiatives happening at Publix, across many business areas,” Murphy said. “Whether it’s the way that we go to business and design and construct our stores, there’s a lot involved in the materials that we use, in the techniques that we use to build our stores.”

The new Lexington store, like others in the chain, uses motion-sensor lights in coolers and freezers, LED lighting throughout and carefully maintained HVAC systems. Murphy

said efficiency is critical in a store filled with refrigerated and frozen sections.

“Having a very efficient, effective refrigeration program and HVAC ... to have it be a nice shopping temperature for the customer, too, is really important.”



AI behind the scenes

On the subject of artificial intelligence, Murphy said Publix is taking a deliberate approach – focusing on tools that help employees work faster and more accurately.

“It really is incredible how rapidly AI has exploded across every business, every industry,” he said. “For us at Publix, we’re starting in that direction in several different areas, and primarily, most of it is behind the scenes in trying to help our associates ... with efficiencies.”

He cited examples from store maintenance to pharmacy operations, where AI-powered systems can give employees immediate access to technical manuals, product information or customer service resources.

“I would say with how rapidly that technology is improving, we’re identifying ideas each day that we could potentially apply AI to be able to help us in different ways. So it’s a matter of how much can you do at once? And then you’ve got to prioritize what those areas are,” Murphy said.

Loyalty without selling data

Publix’s loyalty program, Club Publix, launched about seven or eight years ago and offers members digital coupons, recipes, product locations, online ordering and occasional “delight and surprise” offers.

“As our customers sign up ... we begin to understand what’s important to them and what their lifestyle is like,” Murphy said. “We can make them aware when some of their favorite items are on sale ... or help celebrate special occasions for them.”

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He said Club Publix is another method and opportunity for the grocer to interact with customers.

Murphy emphasized that Publix does not sell customer data – a stance he said distinguishes the company from competitors. “We don’t sell customer data. We don’t have plans to do that.”

The loyalty program does include “some marketing and advertising,” along with digital offers that are sent to club members throughout the year “just to see what they’re interested in. However, Publix does not market customer data to create an additional profit center,” Murphy said.

“We’re going to use the customer information that they’ve approved to tell them happy birthday and things like that ... but

to the magnitude that you see some of these other companies are doing, we’re not participating in that way.”

Looking ahead

Founded in 1930, Publix will mark its 95th anniversary later this year. Murphy said the milestone comes as the company modernizes decades-old systems – a process that began five years ago and will take several more to complete.

He said the company has a robust information technology department, with a manager who is “very knowledgeable and very in tune with everything that’s going on.”

“When you’re 95, it’s almost like things you accumulate in your garage,” Murphy said with a laugh.

“We’ve accumulated a lot of systems over 95 years, and so modernizing those and cleaning a lot of those up ... we’re excited about that.”



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Publix proud of partnerships, conservation and hunger-relief efforts

From restoring Florida’s wetlands to fighting hunger with truckloads of fresh produce, Publix Super Markets is leaning into its founding culture of giving back. CEO Kevin Murphy said sustainability, conservation and corporate responsibility are guiding priorities for the Lakeland, Florida-based grocer.

Murphy stressed that sustainability is a long-term effort that touches everything from seafood sourcing to water use.

He added the company does a “significant amount of sustainability and sourcing, whether it’s sourcing of seafood or whether it’s sourcing of produce and things like that ... We want enough food for today, but we also want to have enough food for the future as well.”

Publix is investing in water conservation, land restoration and invasive species removal across Florida. The company partners with organizations such as the Arbor Day Foundation and other organizations to improve natural habitats and protect clean water sources.



More than 3,700 acres have been restored through the company’s reforestation efforts with the Arbor Day Foundation, as well as through its work in the Florida Everglades with the National Audubon Society and the National Park Foundation, according to the Publix website.

In 2023, the initiative hit a milestone of 1 million trees planted statewide, thanks in part to a portion of the proceeds donated from the sale of Publix reusable bags.

In 2024, funding supported the planting of 250,000 trees in the Econfina Creek watershed, a once-thriving forest ecosystem in the Florida Panhandle that was devastated by Hurricane Michael.

Murphy noted that Publix is a big user of water and wants to ensure “that we have water today and water tomorrow.”

In addition to its retail stores, Publix also has 10 manufacturing plants which use a lot of water as well.

“We’re very, very involved in all of those conservation activities and sustainability activities, to just be a good partner in it,” Murphy said. “It takes all of us working together. I’m proud of some of the programs that we’ve got in place and we’re working on.”



NPS image by Shawn Wolfe

He added that the impact goes beyond the environment. Restored swamplands bring back fish and birds while ensuring Florida’s clean water supply.

According to its website, Publix also has supported ocean conservation efforts such as fishery improvement projects that enhance sustainable seafood practices and coral reef restoration projects to restore and protect Florida’s coral reef ecosystem. The company also is helping to restore water in the Florida Everglades and improve the health of wetland habitats.

“After all, Florida is our home state, and we want to make sure Florida stays beautiful for a very long time,” Murphy said.

Fresh produce donation program expands

On the social impact front, Murphy pointed to the company’s fresh produce donation program, which has become a cornerstone of its hunger-relief efforts.

Publix buys surplus fruits and vegetables directly from farmers across its operating states and donates them to Feeding America partner food banks.

“At Publix, we purchase millions and millions of dollars of produce from local farmers in the areas that we operate,” Murphy said. “It’s produce that would have gotten shredded up and turned over, or stuff that maybe they weren’t able to get to market or was overproduction.

“We purchase all that, which is very fresh, wholesome produce. And we deliver truckloads of that to those 32 Feeding America food partners on a regular basis throughout the year.”

He said the program makes a critical difference for local food banks.

“What I love to hear from most of them is it’s the first time they’ve ever had fresh produce, and they’ve never been able to have fresh product in these Feeding America food shelters,” he said.

“We’re getting good, wholesome food out to the people that need it the most. We’re trying to do as much as we can to really reduce and hopefully eliminate hunger, at least in the areas that we operate.”

The donations add up to at least \$10 million annually, with Publix covering the cost of purchasing, transporting and delivering the produce.

Publix achieved a record year in 2024, donating more than 115 million pounds of food and pushing its Good Together food donation program past the 1-billion-pound mark since its inception in 2009.

This milestone was shared at the company’s Hunger Summit, held in February. The event brought together Publix leaders and Feeding America partner food bank representatives from across the Southeast to collaborate on ways to get food into the hands of people who need it the most, according to a company press release.

Publix’s food donation program was piloted in a small group of stores in 2009 and expanded companywide by 2011. Through the program, the company donates food from the stores’ deli, grocery, meat and produce departments that is no longer salable but safe for consumption to Feeding America partner food banks and other nonprofit organizations. In September 2024, Publix renamed its effort the Good Together food donation program and added more than 4,000 products for donation.

“As a major food retailer, we know how to do food best,” Murphy said. “We believe helping to eliminate hunger in those areas that we operate in is something that we can be very good at and do very well.”

Murphy described the company’s second annual Hunger Summit as a way to listen and learn from its nonprofit partners.

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1 billion pounds of food!

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“We brought them all in to just say, ‘OK, what are we doing? How do we get better? Let’s hear the bad. Let’s hear the good. What are some ideas?’” he said. “Even some of the smaller ones are helping some of the bigger ones. And it’s just great, but really, it’s about celebrating that success.”

At the 2025 Hunger Summit, Publix announced a \$6 million Publix Super Markets Charities grant opportunity to support capital improvements at food banks. This grant opportunity, in addition to PSMC’s annual donations to help people facing food insecurity, brings its total investment to help end hunger to more than \$69 million since 2015.

Associates drive culture of giving

Beyond donations, Publix associates play a hands-on role in local hunger-relief and conservation efforts.

Murphy said Publix associates will volunteer at Feeding America food centers, boxing and bagging fresh produce and helping load it into people’s cars.

These efforts are anchored in Publix Serves events, which draw thousands of associates to volunteer across more than 150 environmental and food-distribution activities.

Murphy said Publix Serves events, held twice each year, generate more volunteers than they can use, with some 7,500 associates participating across the company’s footprint in a single week.

Legacy of service

Murphy tied the company’s community outreach back to Publix founder George Jenkins, who built the company on a culture of generosity.

“We talk about our community outreach. I can’t be more proud of our associates and how they perpetuate the culture that Mr. George showed us from the very beginning,” Murphy said. “It’s all about giving back. You really wouldn’t have much if you didn’t give so much away. Our associates today continue to behave in that same manner.”

Why it matters

For Murphy, sustainability and community outreach aren’t separate priorities – they’re two sides of the same promise.

Publix’s combined strategy – restoring ecosystems, conserving water, donating fresh food and empowering associates – underscores how a regional grocer can be both a business leader and a positive force for community change.

With more than 1 billion pounds of food donated, more than a million trees planted and millions of dollars channeled into hunger relief, Publix’s approach marries sustainability and social impact in tangible, lasting ways.

Murphy said the goal is simple: “To be a good partner” and ensure that Publix’s impact extends well beyond its stores.

