Seafood processing plant, catering facility planned

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Cajun Bayou Distributors, the central management company for Ralph & Kacoo’s, plans to build a $300,000 seafood processing plant on Airline Drive and is investing $1.1 million in a catering facility next to its Bluebonnet Drive restaurant.

Plans also are being laid for a downtown restaurant in 1989, the seventh outlet for the Louisiana-based chain founded by Ralph and Kacoo Olinde. Each restaurant adds about 13-15 support jobs at Cajun’s Baton Rouge headquarters.

Cajun General Manager Todd Gerald said the seafood processing plant will supply the restaurant chain with an average of 75 percent of its product and give Ralph & Kacoo’s “complete control from the water to the table.”

The plant will process about 25,000 pounds of seafood weekly, Gerald said. The set-up will help the chain cope with seafood shortages by maintaining quantity from a steady local supply, ensure quality and stabilize expenses, Gerald said.

Gerald said the chain gets about 50 percent of its seafood supply from out of state. The processing plant should cut that dependency down to 15 percent.

“We will stabilize our costs is what it will do,” Gerald said.

The chain will still depend on other Louisiana-based processors who meet Ralph & Kacoo’s seafood standards.

Gerald said Ralph & Kacoo’s will operate a catering service out of the former restaurant next to its Bluebonnet location near Interstate 10.

He said Ralph & Kacoo’s is often asked to host parties of 50-350 on Friday and Saturday nights, but can not tie up a block of its restaurant on weekends.

Ralph & Kacoo’s original Baton Rouge location at 7110 Airline Drive originally was meant to host catered events. However, its restaurant business only fell by 12 percent after the Bluebonnet location opened, and space is limited at that location.

The catering facility is costing about $1.1 million for the purchase price, renovations and equipment, Gerald said.

It will employ about 40 people and will open in November.

The processing plant also is slated for a November opening and will employ 20-25 people. The plant will be on a seven-acre tract on Airline between Hurricane Creek and Victoria Drive. Cajun Bayou already operates a central laundry facility at the site, which employs 12 people.

The plant will process freshwater and saltwater catfish, Gulf finfish, shrimp, oysters, softshell crabs and softshell crawfish.

The plant will open in the slow winter season to gear up for spring. Gerald said the plant has room for expansion and eventually could supply restaurants outside the R&K chain. He said Cajun had outside sales of $100,000 per month last year.

“We think we can start this, step back, ... really organize it and get it going,” Gerald said.

Although a number of processing plants have been established in Louisiana, Gerald said much of Louisiana’s product still goes out of state for processing and does not return, especially with the Cajun craze that has swept the nation.

The local plant will ensure Ralph & Kacoo’s of both quantity and freshness, Gerald said.

“Quality into the backdoor equals quality at the table,” he said.

The chain also will be able to post a quality control inspector at the plant, instead of employing one for each restaurant.

Cajun Bayou will provide fishing boats on the Gulf with its own requirements and specifications. Gerald said the arrangement could attract more boat landings to the Louisiana coast and provide an additional ripple of activity.

The processing plant site is awaiting zoning action from the city-parish planning and zoning commission and approval from the Metropolitan Council.

The facility will be in an Enterprise Zone, making it eligible for certain tax breaks. Application approval is expected within 90 days. Gerald said hiring will be conducted under “targeted job” and job training act programs catering to the unemployed.

Cajun Bayou Distributors was established in 1983 as a central management company and commissary to Ralph & Kacoo’s. It is headquartered at the Bluebonnet Drive restaurant.

The company operates a fleet of five trucks. As a parent company, Cajun oversees purchasing, accounting, computer operations, maintenance, payrolls and other operational functions. Restaurant management and employee training are conducted in Baton Rouge. A “decor” warehouse also is maintained here.

Cajun Bayou employs about 65 people in its corporate offices. The two Baton Rouge restaurants employ about 390.

In addition to the three Baton Rouge and Dallas restaurants, the chain has two in New Orleans and one in Bossier City.