Chick-fil-A lands downtown
Restaurant opens at Chicago and Wabash avenues; chain plans to expand to at least 18 in area
By Emily Bryson York, Tribune reporter
June 16, 2011

Chick-fil-A opened its first downtown Chicago location Thursday, at 30 E. Chicago Ave. on Loyola University Chicago's Water Tower campus.

Just a block east of a highly popular McDonald's at Chicago Avenue and State Street, the new restaurant's opening-day festivities were hard to miss, with a person in a cow costume dancing in an "Eat Mor Chikin" T-shirt, and a DJ blaring buoyant tunes like "All You Need is Love."

For the uninitiated, Chick-fil-A's advertising has for many years featured cows encouraging people to give bovines a break and opt for a chicken sandwich. Also, they can't spell.

Outside the restaurant, at the corner of Chicago and Wabash avenues, Leila Keene and Ted Pilson, both of Chicago, sat enjoying the remainder of their waffle fries and iced tea.

"I'm a big fan and I was so excited when I heard they were coming to downtown Chicago," Keene said, straining to be heard over "We Got the Beat." Keene said she makes a point of visiting Chick-fil-A while traveling to Hilton Head, S.C., and Cleveland. "Anywhere there's a Chick-fil-A, I'm there," she said.

At the door, a greeter estimated wait times at 4 minutes at 1:30 p.m. as another worker handed out tiny stuffed cows and others offered paper menus. The line moved quickly toward the front, and although most tables were full, they were also decorated with red gerbera daisies, and servers were out in force, talking animatedly with customers and cleaning tables.

Past the dining area is a wide bay of cash registers, with flat-screen TVs, most showing the menu, and one in the center showing videos about the food, including how a grilled chicken salad is made. Customers are called to a register by a small red cow bell.

Chick-fil-A offers 52 free meals to 100 people every time it opens a restaurant. The line, which officially began at 6 p.m. Wednesday, drew 200 people. By way of a raffle, half of those in line were allowed to camp out, braving the rain, and received a certificate at 6 a.m.

The store design will serve as a test for Chick-fil-A, which has built its base in areas where customers are more likely to drive to the restaurant or use the drive-through. The privately-held, Atlanta-based chain is working on how to offer the same restaurant experience for walk-in diners.
Chick-fil-A spokeswoman Brenda Morrow said the store has eight registers, designed to minimize lines, and a catering call area, where large orders are filled. The restaurant has indoor seating for 120 and outdoor seating for 22.

Chick-fil-A opened its first Chicago-area location in Aurora, and now has three other locations: Orland Park, Wheaton and downtown. The chain is opening a Schaumburg restaurant in August and has plans to open 18 or more in the area during the next three years. Morrow said Chicago is a focal point in the chain's growth strategy.

Last year, Chick-fil-A's sales grew 11.4 percent to $3.85 billion, according to Technomic, a Chicago-based restaurant consulting firm. Chick-fil-A has 1,564 locations, all funded by cash on hand. The average restaurant posts about $3 million in sales each year, or more than an average McDonald's, and that's with fewer days each year because Chick-fil-A is closed on Sundays for religious reasons.

The 65-year-old chain, owned by CFA Properties Inc, is now the second-largest limited-service chicken chain, in the United States. It's more than twice the size of Popeye's, but more than $1 billion in sales behind KFC, which had 5,055 stores in 2010, according to Technomic. But KFC has posted declining sales and market share for several years, and Chick-fil-A has grown.