



## No wait, no fuss...just ice baby

By KAREN VOYLES, St. Petersburg Sun

What may be the hottest new trend in the ice business is a simple one.

Build miniature ice plants in places where people will be willing to stop their cars and spend \$1.50 to buy 20 pounds of ice from a vending machine that is open 24 hours a day.

That is all there is to it. No waiting in lines with a bag of melting ice or waiting for a convenience store to open or waiting for a credit card transaction to be completed. Just ice. Paid for with cash.

"It's really a simple concept," said Jim Evans, owner of an ice vending business on U.S. 90 East in Lake City. Most sales take less than a minute.

Consumers, like Lamar Jones of Tampa who bought two bags at the Chiefland ice vending unit this week on his way to scalloping in Steinhatchee, said it makes a lot of sense to sell ice by itself.

"I don't want to be standing in some line waiting to buy ice for twice as much money when I can just drive up here, get what I want and get gone," Jones said.

Ice industry officials are interested to see how well the idea holds up long-term. Among those watching the new niche business is Ed Norris of Archer, this year's secretary-treasurer of the Southern Ice Exchange who has been in the ice business since 1975. "I've been told this is to the ice industry as the ATM was to the banking industry," Norris said. "Time will tell."

Ken Edmondson, owner of the ice vending machines in Chiefland and Cross City which opened in April and one in Madison which opened for business in December, said all three have been very busy, but that less than a year into a business is not enough time to predict long-term results.

Edmondson's units were made in Moultrie, Ga., by Ice House America, a Jacksonville-based business owned by Bob Alligood, a University of Florida graduate whose first careers were in architecture, engineering and design. Alligood said Ice House now has 24 dealers from Virginia to Nevada selling units that compete directly with companies that bag ice to be sold at retail stores. "What we offer is twice the ice for the same amount of money," Alligood said. That is one way to identify his units from others - they bear the words "Twice the Ice."

Alligood's system is fully robotic and can put out 500 bags of ice in 24 hours. His customers have the option of buying 16 pounds of bagged ice or putting their cooler under the outlet and buying 20 pounds of unbagged ice, both for \$1.50.

Most of the ice vending machines on the market, including those produced by Alligood's firm are smaller than a semi trailer without its wheels and most are painted white.

Dr. John Fruin,, chief of the Food Inspection Bureau of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, said there is no set shelf life for ice as long as it stays frozen.

"The things that have a shelf life by state statute are oysters and grade-A dairy products," milk, cream, cottage cheese and yogurt, said Fruin, who did have one concern about the vending units.

"Properly maintained, they will be a pretty good unit. The concern we have is one that came to our attention in August. If there is a hurricane or other problem with a water supply, you would have to start over again - emptying the whole unit and cleaning and sanitizing it," Fruin said.