

Business Roundup: August 2025

Every month we run down notable news items from the area's businesses.

BY GERALD WITT • SEPTEMBER 3, 2025



GOOD OLE TENNESSEE BAR PROPRIETOR YOSHITOSHI "YOSHI" MOMOKI IN HIS TOKYO ESTABLISHMENT. (GERALD WITT PHOTO.)

We visit a bar that's not exactly local — it's actually in Tokyo — but has a Tennessee theme thanks to its owner, a University of Tennessee alumnus. Closer to home, we look at a partnership involving the Tennessee Valley Authority to deliver nuclear power to Google data centers; 865 Fest, which is Startup Day rebranded; the arrival locally of Sprouts Farmers Market; and more.

Tennessee Bar in Tokyo Thrives

Yoshitoshi Momoki's Good Ole Tennessee Bar would be a good fit for Knoxville, but its home is far from Neyland Stadium — in Tokyo.

The bar is Momoki's ode to the state where he attended college — he graduated in 1993 from the University of Tennessee with a communications degree.

On a typical weeknight in Tokyo, Good Ole Tennessee Bar welcomes a mix of Japanese salarymen, American expats and curious tourists who want a bit of Tennessee charm among the high-rises in the world's largest city. Visitors can sign a map showing where they're from in Tennessee, the second incarnation of the map since the bar opened in February 2024. The first one got loaded with signatures.

After operating the bar for more than a year, the proprietor is planning to add staff. Momoki — who prefers to go by Yoshi — spoke to Compass correspondent Gerald Witt during a Tokyo visit in the spring and via Instagram for this story.

The bar pays homage to Yoshi's own "golden age," the five years he spent in Tennessee. It was then that he learned to be himself, an outgoing guy with a penchant for dance and a joke. Through the UT International House he met likeminded friends from across the globe. Yoshi calls his memories of Tennessee "good ole Tennessee stories."

"I love to sing and dance, and hang out with lots of people," he said, adding that he hopes to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" before a football game at Neyland Stadium someday. UT Chancellor Donde Plowman, on a visit this summer, told him that she'd "give it her best shot," he said. Yoshi said he hopes it happens, but he has loftier goals.

"I want to encourage minority students to keep following their dreams," Yoshi said. His dream wasn't to open a bar, exactly, but to establish a meeting ground for patrons. "People start thinking about visiting my bar when they come to Japan."

Eager visitors will ask before packing their bags what memorabilia he needs — Tennessee is the Volunteer State, after all. Framed, signed photos of athletes and famous Tennesseans decorate his establishment's walls. UT bobbleheads and figurines line shelves. Stickers pasted on the beer fridge are from Memphis, and the cooler holds Nashville beers. Chattanooga Whiskey sits behind the bar next to Jack Daniel's. A corner TV plays live Tennessee sporting events, or recorded games in the offseason.

While UT orange tends to announce its presence, Yoshi is careful to emphasize that his place celebrates the whole state.

Business is going well. His watering hole has been featured by the [UT alumni office](#), [knoxnews](#) and even the [Tennessee Department of Economic & Community Development](#). [Full bar photos](#) get posted to Instagram. He wants to add kitchen staff so he can mingle more with regulars and out-of-towners.

His success lies there: Yoshi reads customers and gives a "Howdy, y'all" to all who enter. He bears a wide, playful smile, with a winking side-eye. Don't know Japanese? No English? No problem. He'll get the room laughing at the same joke told in two languages. At evening's end, Yoshi individually walks customers to the door and outside, often for just one more selfie.

"You want to interact with me," he said.

Yoshi hopes for a direct flight between Tokyo and Nashville eventually, and there may one day be enough business between Japan and Tennessee to justify it. Denso, Bridgestone, Nissan and other Japanese companies have facilities in Tennessee. The state Department of Economic & Community Development has a [Japanese-language website](#) to recruit more business.

Yoshi wants to be a part of deepening the connection between his homeland and adopted home, as an ambassador of some kind between Tennessee communities in Tokyo and Japanese people living in and around Tennessee. Until then, Yoshi said, he'll continue to spread the word about the state he loves so much through his bar.

"I've been dedicating my whole life to Tennessee," he said. "I want to show so many people about Southern hospitality."

Announcements and Openings

Data Center Power Plan: Google, Kairos Power and the Tennessee Valley Authority are collaborating to help meet America's growing energy demand and bolster the country's leadership in advanced nuclear energy.

Through a new power purchase agreement announced Aug. 18 between Kairos Power and TVA, Kairos Power's Hermes 2 Plant in Oak Ridge will deliver up to 50 megawatts (MW) of reliable, 24/7 energy to the TVA grid that powers Google data centers in Tennessee and Alabama.

The collaboration demonstrates TVA's goal of providing innovative energy sources like Kairos Power's advanced nuclear technology and support for new clean generation, according to a news release.

TVA is the first U.S. utility to sign such an agreement to buy electricity from an advanced, GEN IV reactor, and Hermes 2 is the first deployment under [Kairos Power's landmark deal with Google](#) to enable 500MW of new, advanced nuclear capacity to come online by 2035 in support of Google's load growth. To accelerate the delivery of clean energy to Google, Kairos Power will increase Hermes 2's output from 28MW to 50MW generated by a single reactor, scheduled to begin operations in 2030.

Google will receive the clean energy from the plant through the TVA system to further decarbonize data-center operations in Montgomery County (northwest of Nashville) and in Jackson County, Ala.

"To power the future, we need to grow the availability of smart, firm energy sources," Amanda Peterson Corio, Google's global head of data center energy, said in a news release. "This collaboration with TVA, Kairos Power, and the Oak Ridge community will accelerate the deployment of innovative nuclear technologies and help support the needs of our growing digital economy while also bringing firm carbon-free energy to the electricity system. Lessons from the development and operation of the Hermes 2 plant will help drive down the cost of future reactors, improving the economics of clean firm power generation in the TVA region and beyond."

Google, Kairos Power and TVA aim to deliver an innovative solution for industrial energy users to meet their growing business needs responsibly while driving local economic growth and opportunity. This approach protects public electricity customers by limiting development costs to partners while helping to bring costs down for customers as additional units are delivered.

"Energy security is national security, and electricity is the strategic commodity that is the building block for AI and our nation's economic prosperity," said Don Moul, TVA president and CEO. "The world is looking for doing business. By developing a technology, a supply chain, and a delivery model that can build an industry to unleash American energy, we can attract and support companies like Google and help America win the AI race."

Kairos Power is a nuclear technology, engineering and manufacturing company focused on commercializing the fluoride salt-cooled, high-temperature reactor (KP-FHR), a clean energy solution that can be deployed with robust safety at an affordable cost to enable deep decarbonization.

"This collaboration is an important enabler to making advanced nuclear energy commercially competitive," said Mike Laufer, Kairos Power CEO and co-founder. "The re-envisioned Hermes 2 gets us closer to the commercial fleet sooner and could only be made possible by close collaboration with TVA and Google, and a supportive local community. We are excited to grow Kairos Power's operations in Oak Ridge while writing a new chapter in the region's distinguished nuclear history."

Premier Transportation is expanding into the Tri-Cities region. A 2.5-acre site will house a 7,000-square-foot facility with three service bays and a wash bay. The new Tri-Cities facility near the I-26/I-81 interchange will employ 35 and assist Premier's existing operations in Knoxville and Chattanooga, where the company maintains a fleet of more than 50 motorcoaches.

The new Tri-Cities facility, with 15 new motorcoaches, is expected to provide faster service, competitive rates and enhanced support for Premier clients in Johnson City, Kingsport, Bristol and surrounding communities. The company [headquarters](#) is in Knoxville.

Entrepreneur Festival Rebrands: Knoxville's "[865 Fest](#)" (formerly Startup Day) is back with a new location and programming. Hosted by the Innov865 Alliance, the event is Tuesday, Sept. 16, at Bridgewater Place, 205 Bridgewater Road. There will be new sessions and speakers, along with the pitch competition that awards a total of \$15,000 in cash prizes.

865 Fest will feature keynote speakers including certified nurse practitioner [Jordan Harper](#), founder and CEO of Barefaced, and [Mark Pancratz](#), founding partner and private wealth adviser of Axiom Wealth Management. Knoxville Mayor [Indya Kincannon](#) will give welcoming remarks.

Expanded programming includes two featured panels — one on the business behind Knoxville's multipurpose Covenant Health Park, presented by [Visit Knoxville](#), and another focused on opportunities for collaboration and innovation between startups and established corporations, presented by [Three Roots Capital](#) and [Carrasco | Trump](#).

Also new this year, 865 Fest will feature two breakout session rooms presented by [PYA](#) and the [Knoxville News Sentinel](#). These sessions will help inspire and equip entrepreneurs, from celebrating milestones like "10 Years of the Maker City" to exploring practical strategies such as building authentic customer connections.

865 Fest's signature startup pitch competition will celebrate its 13th year. Six of Knoxville's top startups will pitch their companies before a panel of judges and a live audience for a chance to win up to \$15,000 in cash prizes. Attendees will vote for their favorite startup to win a \$5,000 Crowd Favorite Award, and judges will select the \$10,000 Judges' Choice winner.

Doors open at 8:30 a.m. Sept. 16 for breakfast and registration. Programming begins at 9 a.m. Lunch will be provided. General admission tickets are available online for \$75. [Click here](#) to purchase tickets. Tickets will be available to students at no cost.

Growing Financial Literacy: In the 2024-2025 academic year, SouthEast Bank's support of personal-finance education has reached 2,600 students across 30 high schools in Tennessee. This program was made available through SouthEast Bank's strategic partnership with [EVERFI](#), a leader in powering social impact through education.

EVERFI's financial-literacy curriculum teaches high-school students how to make smart choices that promote financial well-being over their lifetime. The program features an interactive learning platform that includes bite-sized lessons designed specifically to translate complex financial concepts like understanding a pay stub or completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form, and introduces basic financial-literacy skills needed as high-school students transition into adulthood.

"Understanding your finances and making sound financial decisions is key to a strong future, but many people don't know where to turn to get the information they need in a way that is age-appropriate and easily understandable," said Ray Martinez, CEO of EVERFI, in a news release. "By laying the foundation for financial literacy at a pivotal age, students will be prepared with the skills needed to enter the new economy and make a smooth transition into adulthood."

Sprouts, Sprouting: Sprouts Farmers Market opened its first Knoxville location on Friday, Aug. 29. Knoxville took a [tour of the place](#) in the former Badoock Home Furniture store. The new store at 9622 Kingston Pike joins more than 450 Sprouts stores nationally, with Tennessee locations in Franklin, Germantown, Lakeland, Madison, Memphis, Murfreesboro and Nashville.

Recognitions and Designations

Stroke Care Recognition: The American Heart Association recognized two Tennova Healthcare hospitals for stroke care and managing chronic conditions.

Turkey Creek Medical Center received the Target: Stroke Honor Roll Award and the Target: Type 2 Diabetes Honor Roll Award, while North Knoxville Medical Center earned the Target: Stroke Bronze Award. Both hospitals also met specific scientific guidelines as a Primary Stroke Center, featuring a comprehensive system for rapid diagnosis and treatment of stroke patients admitted to the emergency department.

"Tennova Healthcare is committed to improving care by adhering to the latest treatment guidelines and streamlining processes to ensure timely and proper care for heart attacks and strokes," said Tony Benton, CEO of Tennova Healthcare East. "Get With The Guidelines programs make it easier for our teams to put proven knowledge and guidelines to work on a daily basis, which helps us ensure more people in Knoxville experience longer, healthier lives."

Award for KCDC Executive: Terry McKee, procurement director for Knoxville's Community Development Corporation, has been named the recipient of the National Institute of Governmental Purchasing's 2025 Integrity Award.

McKee, who has served KCDC for 20 years and has nearly 40 total years of experience, earned the recognition for his consistent modeling of ethical behavior that has shaped and inspired professionals across the public procurement field, creating a legacy of trust, transparency and stewardship. He received the award in July.

This is the fourth time McKee has been recognized by NIGP. He earned the Distinguished Service Award in 2022, Procurement Manager of the Year Award in 2017 and in 2013 the Spirit Award, which is given to public-purchasing professionals who have played a significant role in shaping the organization.

Movers and Shakers

New Government Affairs Officer at UTMC: The University of Tennessee Medical Center announced the appointment of Brandi Lowell to the position of senior vice president, chief government relations and grants officer in August. Lowell has worked across legislative, executive and private sectors for two decades, according to a news release.

Lowell most recently served as principal at The Ingram Group, where she advised hospitals, corporations and coalitions on navigating the complexities of government policy. Her work with a collaborative of Knoxville-area hospitals helped secure hundreds of millions of dollars in federal reimbursement and program funding.

She also led efforts supporting Medicaid supplemental-payment programs and rural-health investments. Lowell also directed the Tennessee Business Forum to build relationships with business and community leaders across the state.

Lowell previously was chief of staff to former U.S. Rep. Heath Shuler of North Carolina, and worked in the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, where she focused on public affairs and policy coordination. She also has been director of federal governmental affairs at Duke Energy.

"Brandi's strategic insight, policy acumen and deep relationships at every level of government make her an ideal fit to advance the medical center's mission, vision and values," said Dr. Keith Gray, president and CEO of University of Tennessee Medical Center. "We're thrilled to welcome her to our team and community."

Lowell received a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and a master's degree in international policy and practice from George Washington University.

End-of-life Pet Service Grows: CodaPet has added a new licensed veterinarian in Knoxville. The company provides peaceful, in-home pet euthanasia through a network of compassionate and licensed veterinarians who offer end-of-life care for pets at home. Dr. Nicole Ramos joins Dr. Mackenzie Treece to serve Knoxville and surrounding cities.

"It is my wish that every family in Knoxville become aware of at-home pet euthanasia so they may provide a peaceful and compassionate end-of-life experience for their beloved pets when their time comes," Dr. Karen Whala, a co-founder of CodaPet, said in a news release. "As an in-home euthanasia veterinarian, I repeatedly hear the heartfelt gratitude and the relief a family feels when they have been able to grant their pet this gift."



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