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Golf means green to central Alabama

By Marty Roney

PRATTVILLE -- Cha-ching!

That's the sound local cash registers have been making with the Navistar LPGA Classic going on in Prattville. The tournament wrapped up play Sunday, and local leaders already are looking forward to next year's stop, which will once again bring a full field of the best women golfers to town.

Immediately after the tournament ended Sunday, officials said the day's attendance was 11,013, which was about 4,000 more than Sunday from the 2008 tournament, said Bill Lang, media director for the tournament.

"We were up every day this year compared to last year. We are very pleased with the gallery and the amount of support shown for the tournament from the River Region," Lang said.

Prattville Mayor Jim Byard Jr. spent the afternoon on the 18th hole watching as the golfers came in. "This is the largest crowd I have seen this early on a Sunday since the tournament began," he said right after noon, looking over several thousand people that could be seen from the skybox.

"I think with the amount of talent of these ladies that the River Region has decided to make this tournament their own and we're looking forward to a successful year next year."

The entire region -- not just Prattville -- will benefit economically from the tournament, Byard said.

"You really can't fully calculate the economic impact something like the Navistar Classic brings to Prattville and the River Region," Byard said.

"You weren't able to find a hotel room in Prattville or Montgomery this week. It was a great boost for our local businesses, a much-needed boost during these tough economic times."

Media outlets from around the world were in Prattville for the event, and the Golf Channel broadcast play from each of the tournament days. "The level of exposure the Robert Trent Jones Trail and the River Region received this week is tremendous," Byard said.

In 2008, the weeklong event drew about 50,000 spectators and generated an economic impact of more than \$7 million, said Jonathan Romeo, tournament director.

Hotel rooms filled, restaurant trips and purchases made are easy to point to as gauges of the success of the tournament, said Jeff Bates, an economics analyst at Auburn Montgomery's School of Business. He also serves as student services coordinator and an economics instructor at the business school.

However, there is no real way to put a value on the "passive" dollars that come in as a result of the event, he said.

"So many of the players in the LPGA are international, and they have avid followings at home," he said. "These ladies are closely followed at home. That type of exposure puts Prattville and the River Region on the international map.

"The golf tournament brings people to the region from around the United States and around the world; many have never been to Alabama before. Many would never come to Alabama if it weren't for golf. That gives us a chance to show what the real Alabama is like, and an opportunity to do away with some of those preconceived images of the state some people may have."

This isn't the first time Prattville has been in the spotlight. It's the third year the LPGA has stopped in the city. Also, the Buy.com tour championship was played in Prattville for three years beginning in 2001. The tour became the Nationwide Tour in 2004, and again Prattville was the host of the championship for three years.

The economic impact -- and image buffing -- Alabama has received is just what David Bronner was looking for when he decided to build the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail in the late '80s. The trail now has 26 courses at 11 different sites, offering 468 holes of golf.

National golf publications perennially list the trail at or near the top of public golf courses in the nation.

Bronner added that the trail has been a boost for tourism and economic development.

"Just look at the Navistar Classic," he said. "Navistar brought business contacts from all over the country to Prattville this week. For many of them it was their first trip to Alabama. If we get them here, we have the opportunity to show them why they need to bring their industry to Alabama."

Economic development is the key, said Montgomery Mayor Todd Strange.

"It's not just good for Prattville, it's good for Montgomery, it's good for Elmore County, it's good for the River Region as a whole," he said. "I'm all about economic development, and the Navistar Classic is a great economic development tool."
