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Golf trail weathering recession

By [M.J. Ellington](#)
Montgomery Bureau

Published: Sunday, June 28, 2009 at 3:30 a.m.

As economic hard times prompt consumers to trim discretionary spending, more golf courses find themselves in the financial rough these days.

The creator of Alabama's \$160 million Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail said business is down slightly at the trail's 12 sites, but they are weathering the recession better than many others.

Attendance and revenue are down for the golf trail, but not by much, a fact that courses in other areas envy, said Retirement Systems of Alabama Chief David Bronner.

He launched the golf trail in 1992 with four venues. The trail has expanded through the years and now includes 36 holes in the Shoals.

The golf trail remains one of the top attractions in Alabama and annually attracts visitors from virtually every state and numerous countries.

"A lot of the courses that are going under are those developed to try and sell houses," Bronner said.

As the housing markets plummeted and neighborhoods went under, golf courses built to attract upscale property owners fell prey to the economy as well, he said.

Bronner said revenue is off about 3 percent at courses on the golf trail this year, but out-of-state business is off about 20 percent.

He said more Alabamians are golfing on the trail probably for the same reason that out-of-state business is off: They're vacationing or planning conferences closer to home.

"That doesn't really help us because the thrust of the trail is tourism," Bronner said.

Bronner envisioned the golf trail as a way to recruit tourists and retirees to Alabama, often a "pass through" state for people on their way to golf courses and resorts in other states.

The vision worked, and the recession still hurts luxury recreation and accommodations, but Bronner said the trail is faring better than most resorts.

"It is absolutely normal during times of recession for travel to be down," said John Cannon, president of Sunbelt Golf, the trail's management company. He said the 3 percent drop is good compared to golf courses and resorts elsewhere.

Cannon said unusual weather this year, particularly heavy spring rains, affected head count more than the economy. He said promotional offers, including trail discount golfing cards available to in-state residents and trail spa cards that anyone can purchase, also help bring in customers.

But even the trail has tightened its belt.

Golfers at the 36-hole Shoals complex in Colbert County are among the victims because GPS devices are no longer available on golf carts.

Sunbelt discontinued the GPS devices, which help golfers better manage the course, at all but one site.

Cannon said the \$2 million price tag to replace outdated GPS equipment on the trail's 1,700 golf carts was not worth the expense at present.

"We could do that, but we decided it was better to spend it on the core product - the courses," he said.

Bronner said cost was an issue in removing the GPS devices with 11-year-old technology, but a disagreement with the manufacturer was the biggest reason.

Only the upscale Ross Bridge course in Hoover, where greens fees for a round of golf run \$80 to \$120, has GPS.

At other sites where fees average \$50 per player, Cannon said it's not financially realistic to add new GPS right now.

Alabama Department of Tourism and Travel does marketing for Robert Trent Jones resorts and other state courses at golfing shows across the country. Avid golfer Kerry Flowers, financial services director for state tourism, pitches the trail at some of the largest golf shows.

Golfers at shows in Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis and Indianapolis all know about Alabama's courses and come here to relax and escape harsh winters, he said.

"This year, I gave out about 10 percent fewer brochures than in the past because of the recession," Flowers said. Bill Lange, public relations director for the golf trail and hotels, said he's pushing the "over-the-top experience in under-the-radar places" the state resorts offer.

The trail was second to the U.S. Space and Rocket Center in Huntsville in tourist attraction attendance in 2008.

Lange said marketing stresses value and luxury unsurpassed anywhere. He pointed to top rankings the trail earned from the Professional Golfers Association, golf magazines, and hotel and restaurant raters.

Lange said the Trail Golf Card, available only to Alabama residents, allows golfers to play at a discount. The new Trail Spa Card, which gives in- and out-of-state purchasers discounts at the trail's resort hotel spas and restaurants, is surprisingly popular, he said.

"We set a goal to sell 2,000 of the spa cards during 2009. We already sold over 2,000 the first five months of the year," Lange said.

"We will do promotions, but nothing that devalues our product."

Bronner said business on the trail, which The New York Times called "some of the best public golf on earth," will increase as the economy comes out of the slump.
