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Prattville eyes more LPGA

By Marty Roney

PRATTVILLE -- The third time may be the charm for this year's Navistar LPGA Classic in Prattville, with tournament officials expecting an extension of the event's three-year contract.

A full field of 144 of the best women golfers in the world will descend on the Senator Course at Capitol Hill the week of Sept. 28 through Oct. 4.

"Navistar is very impressed with the two very good years we have seen with the Classic," Jonathan Romeo, tournament director, said. "The LPGA is pleased with the tournament and the Robert Trent Jones Trail. I am very confident we will see an extension of the contract, and that Navistar and the LPGA will want to stay in the River Region for several years."

Last year's tournament attracted a gallery of more than 30,000 for the week, said Prattville Mayor Jim Byard Jr. The event created an economic impact for the River Region of about \$20 million, he said, citing a University of Alabama study.

"Navistar is a tremendous boost to our economy, but it's a benefit to the economy of the River Region as a whole," Byard said. "It gives our local governments an opportunity to pull together and work for the common good. You have the golfers, of course, but you also have LPGA officials, people from Navistar and their customers, The Golf Channel and international sports media all coming to our area.

"They will fill up our hotel rooms, eat at our restaurants and shop in our stores," he said. "Tourism dollars are good, clean dollars."

Local governments will be asked again this year to contribute to the cost of putting on the tournament. Prattville, as host city, leads the charge. Last year it kicked in \$240,000.

"That's a tremendous amount of money," Byard said. "But when you look at the economic impact Navistar creates, you can see it's an investment."

The city of Montgomery has been a headline sponsor of the classic the last two years, as well as kicking in to fund the past Nationwide and Buy.com tour championships held in Prattville.

Montgomery has seen sales tax collections take serious dips over the past several months, but the Capital City wants to continue supporting the tournament, Mayor Todd Strange said.

"It's going to have to be like everything else when we decide funding, it's going to be a business decision," he said. "But Montgomery has seen just as much benefit as Prattville from these tournaments. Last year the LPGA scheduled several events in downtown Montgomery, and we expect that trend to continue this year. When you have an event of this size come to the area, it's not just Prattville that will benefit. You are going to see good things come to the River Region because of this tournament."

The sluggish economy may cut into the gallery this year, but Romano prefers to look on the bright side. Lorena Ochoa, the world's best woman golfer, is the 2008 champion, and will be returning this year.

"It's no secret that the LPGA and PGA have lost stops this year because of the economy," he said. "What that means is the healthy tournaments, and the Classic is a healthy tournament, get better. What you will see is a stronger field chasing the checks at the healthy tournaments.

"And Lorena is already in to defend, so you are going to see the best players come to Prattville."