

Prattville named top place for golfers to retire

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(Photo: Mickey Welsh/Advertiser)

PRATTVILLE – "Man, I would never get tired of that view," Ed Benson said of the iconic No. 1 tee of the Judge at Prattville's Capitol Hill golf course.

Even if you haven't played the course, you likely have seen that signature image. The fairway drops some 200 feet to the backwaters of the Alabama River, with the Montgomery skyline in the background. Photos have graced promotional items of the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, and were on the cover on state maps a few years ago.

That vista, and Capitol Hill, were good enough for *MONEY* magazine, which has named Prattville as the best place in the country for golfers to retire.

"If golf and retirement go together like gin and tonic, Prattville must be the Tanqueray 10 of golfing towns," the magazine writes. "It is home to three championship courses and sits in the middle of the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, a 488-hole, 26 course putters' paradise stretching over 11 Alabama sites."

Benson, of Louisville, was in town recently with a group of golfing buddies. So is Prattville golfers heaven?

"We've played the trail for years, but we always come back to Prattville and Capitol Hill," said Benson, a salesman for an industrial supply company. "It would be a great place to retire if you love golf. You could play year-round, which is a huge draw for people living in the part of the country where there is snow on the ground four months out of the year."

The designation is good news, said Mike Beverly, director of golf at Capitol Hill.

"Capitol Hill is proud to represent Prattville and the River Region as one of the best places to retire for golfers," Beverly told *MONEY*. "The Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail has always taken pride in offering world class golf at affordable prices. What makes this recognition rewarding is that we are achieving what Dr. (David) Bronner (head of the Retirement Systems of Alabama) intended for the Trail in its inception, which was to build world class golf and change the image of the state while attracting golfers from all over the world to Alabama."

The magazine also listed attractive demographics for Prattville; a ratio of 32 percent of the population being above 50, a median home price of \$150,415, average annual property taxes of \$490 and 24 golf courses within 30 miles of the city."

Capitol Hill's courses are named the Senator, the Legislator and the Judge, in keeping with the governmental theme.

MONEY praised Capitol Hill, and its 1,500 acres and 54 holes.

"Each of Prattville's courses has its own character," the magazine writes. "The Judge, which hugs the Alabama River is arguably the prettiest. The tough, hilly Legislator winds across a cypress swamp. The Senator was named by 'Travel + Leisure' as one of the 100 best courses for under \$100. They're all affordable and open to the public. Green fees run \$45 in the winter and summer and up to \$75 in the spring and fall."

The Impact

The Senator was the first course at Capitol Hill to open in 1998. Prattville has a long history of growth, going back to the mid 1970's. It is no longer that sleepy little farm town. And it is now longer just a bedroom community of Montgomery.

When Capitol Hill opened, it kicked growth in Prattville into hyper drive. Before the course came to town, you could count the number of hotels on one hand. Now there are more than 15 hotels in Prattville. More than 230,000 people have stayed in the Prattville Marriott alone. The course-driven boom also brought national restaurant chains and shopping to Prattville.

In all, tourism spending has jumped by about \$500 million in Autauga, Elmore and Montgomery counties since Capitol Hill opened, according to Jacksonville State University.

"We had leadership in place that recognized the vision and potential of the golf course," said Mayor Bill Gillespie Jr. A golfer himself, he was first elected to the city council in 2004 and became mayor in 2011. "It has been a tremendous boost to our economy. You go to our restaurants, and golfers stand out.

"I regularly go up to them and we talk about Capitol Hill. They stay in our hotels, buy gas here, eat here, visit our stores. That's beneficial for everyone."

Each year about 80,000 rounds are played at Capitol Hill, said Cully Gillem, the course's pro. Capitol Hill is perennially the most popular, or second most popular stop on the trail.

The national designation naming Prattville a retirement destination is great, the mayor said. But the city has more to offer than just great golf. He ticks off Prattville's advantages with practiced ease; A central location with easy access to two interstates, a trip to the mountains is a 2-hour drive north and the beaches are 2 hours south, a robust economy, strong housing market and quality of life.

"Prattville has so much to offer," Gillespie said. "But our biggest asset is our people, they are what make Prattville, Prattville. We have seen tremendous growth. But Prattville has been able to keep that small town spirit of neighbors caring about neighbors."

"We are a very welcoming city, our residents see to that."

The Dream

In the mid 1980's David Bronner came up with an idea. The outspoken head of the Retirement Systems of Alabama wanted to build a series of golf courses across the length and breadth of the state to lure tourism dollars, industry and economic growth. And if the state's image improved along the way, well and good.

His detractors snickered and his supporters wondered if he had lost his marbles. At one time to Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail effort was the largest privately funded construction project in the country.

Nobody's laughing now.

"Oh, everybody thought I was crazy," Bronner said.

The *MONEY* pick of Prattville is vindication of sorts.

"It's great of course for Prattville, but it's also good for the whole trail," he said. "You work very hard for 20 years to accomplish something, and its very worthwhile that 20 years later the recognition keeps coming in."

So do golf-loving retirees, who have settled throughout the River Region. *MONEY* noted that there are 24 courses within 30 miles of Prattville.

Retired Brigadier Gen. Paul Hankins is a member at Wynlakes in Montgomery but plays courses across the area. He has also been here long enough to see the impact those courses have had on the region as a whole.

"It's incredible what (RTJ) has done," Hankins said. "You have the ability to join clubs, but you also have the ability to play the trail. That gives you a little bit of variety from what you play."

He praised the variety of professional golf tournaments in the area too, including the LPGA Tour stop in Prattville and the PGA stop in Auburn.

"You couldn't ask for a better place to live and play golf," Hankins said.

The impact

RTJ Capitol Hill

1,240,593 rounds of golf

158 employees

LPGA tournaments average more than \$9.5 million in economic impact annually

Marriott Prattville

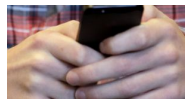
\$46,481,000 in revenue

230,048 guests

1,073,488 meals served

\$15.59 million in wages

\$5.478 million in lodging and sales taxes



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