

Alabama's RTJ Spa Trail

SOURCE: SPAS OF AMERICA

In February, Spas of America officially released its list of Top 100 USA Spas of 2023, and Alabama holds 4 spots on the list.

Spas of America determines its yearly winners by unique page views and consumer choices on spasofamerica.com, with the new criterion for 2023 of upholding no less than a rating of 4.0 on Google Reviews to be included. The list has spas across 34 states, with 4 in Alabama. All of these spas are situated along the renowned Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, owned by the Retirement Systems of Alabama (RSA)



and managed by PCH Hotels & Resorts.

The winning spas are: The Spa at the Shoals (38); The Spa at Ross Bridge (42); The Spa at Grand National (77); and The Spa at Montgomery (90). The RTJ Spa Trail features 6 spas across Alabama and has a reputation for excellence.

"We are truly honored to have 4 of the 6 RTJ Spas represented as the best in the USA," said Taylor Fields, Corporate Director of Spa, Wellness, & Retail for PCH Hotels & Resorts. "All of our spas along the RTJ Spa Trail offer world-class experiences at a time when health and wellness are a priority for many. Our spas provide a unique experience and exude hospitality from the heart and soul."

For more information on the RTJ Spa Trail, visit rtjspa.com. ●

The CHOOSE Act: Long Term Impacts?

BY DAVID G. BRONNER

The CHOOSE Act, Alabama's universal education savings account program, was enacted last month. What does this mean for our state and public education? That remains to be seen and will not be fully known for years. The program will begin in the 2025-2026 school year, but will be limited for the first two school years to students whose families have an adjusted gross income below 300% of the federal poverty level (\$93,600 for a family of 4). **Starting in the 2027-2028 school year, the program will be open to everyone**, subject to the availability of funds appropriated by the Alabama Legislature.

Universal education savings accounts (ESAs) have not been around long enough for us to know the impacts they could have on public education and, in turn, on pension programs. Arizona's program has been in place for the longest, since the 2022-2023 school year. With only one full school year of universal eligibility, there is not enough data from Arizona to gauge the full impact on public education. **There are a few initial data points that are concerning.** First, 75% of the first-year participants had never been enrolled in a public school. Second, the program is currently projected to cost nearly \$1 billion for the next fiscal year

in Arizona.

Will the CHOOSE Act give school choice to the most disadvantaged students who do not currently have any options, or will this mainly fund students already in private schools, such as in Arizona? Will this be a targeted program that balances the funding needs of traditional public education, including magnet and charter schools, or will this pull critical funding from the Education Trust Fund budget?

The impact of universal education savings accounts on public education in Alabama (and elsewhere) will not be fully realized for a few years. My hope is that our state will ensure the program is implemented to help our most disadvantaged students, as opposed to simply diverting public funds to prop up private schools. Because at its best, school choice helps the least able families provide the best education that meets their needs. At its worst, school choice undermines public education by diverting funding to students who already have a choice and the ability to pay for that choice.

Let's hope that Alabama can be at its best and ensure that school choice helps those that need it, while continuing to ensure public education receives the necessary funding. ●

Medicaid Expansion Can Help – Not Break – Alabama's State Budget

BY NEAH M. SCOTT, LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL

Since implementation in 2014, 40 states have expanded Medicaid coverage to close the health insurance coverage gap. Ten states, including

Alabama, have not adopted the expansion. With experience from 40 states and

The RSA's Role in Bringing Mercedes-Benz to Alabama

BY MARK FAGAN

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Alabama faced high unemployment, low tax revenue, inadequate education funding, and insufficient state-service funding. Alabama's industrial jobs were mostly for non-durable goods and relatively low paying. Long-term interest rates were too low to generate adequate investment returns for the Retirement Systems of Alabama (RSA). The RSA began investing in Alabama to increase returns, diversify funds, and stimulate economic growth in the mid-1970s. The RSA's Dr. David Bronner, CEO, and Glen Pringle, Director of Industrial Development, began building relationships with corporate leaders.

Jim Folsom Jr. became Alabama's 50th governor in April 1993 and immediately began leading its efforts to recruit Mercedes-Benz (Mercedes). Folsom declared, "Billy Joe Camp (Director of Alabama Development Office), Elmer Harris (President of Alabama Power), Bronner, Pringle, and I went to Stuttgart, Germany,

on the first trip to meet with the leaders at Mercedes. The CEO brought prestige, and his German heritage helped build initial rapport with the decision-makers. The RSA stayed involved daily during the recruitment process."

Billy Joe Camp stated, "We wanted the CEO present to show support by the state pension fund and overcome an image that Alabama was backward and undeveloped." The late Elmer Harris helped to craft Alabama's \$238 million incentive package for Mercedes to build in Alabama its first auto assembly plant outside of Germany. This subsidy included site preparation and infrastructure, \$95 million; training, \$90 million; state tax credits, \$43 million; and other incentives, \$10 million. Harris said, "The RSA's role in securing Alabama's agreement with Mercedes was critical to culminating the October 1993 announcement that Alabama had beaten 30 other states for the coveted facility."

Governor Fob James came into office

in 1994 before the deal officially closed to build the Mercedes plant. Funds for the agreed-upon package could not be secured, and Alabama was at risk of losing Mercedes to another state. Failing to deliver on the agreement could have jeopardized Alabama's industrial recruiting efforts for years to come. To save the deal, the RSA provided bridge financing (\$109 million bond). The state secured the RSA bond with its TVA receipts (\$12 million per year), and the State Fire Insurance Fund (SFIF) bought \$30 million of the bonds. The TVA receipts were pledged first to the RSA for the 9% interest and principal, with the SFIF getting paid after the RSA was 100% repaid. The state eventually sold a General Obligation Municipal Bond with lower interest rates to finance the incentives.

According to Jo Bonner Jr., President of the University of South Alabama, former six-term congressman, and former Chief of Staff for Governor Kay Ivey, "Had Mercedes not come to Alabama, there would have been no reason to believe other automotive companies would have followed. The addition of Toyota/Mazda in North Alabama, Honda in Lincoln, Hyundai in Hope Hull, and Mercedes' expansion for electric vehicles makes Alabama a national leader in the automotive industry. It is hard to imagine any of this would have been guaranteed had the RSA not been so involved in helping land Mercedes in the early 1990s."

The first vehicle was produced in Vance in 1997. There have been six plant expansions since then, with more than four million vehicles produced. The six million sf facility now has 6,300 employees producing 300,000 vehicles annually, with two-thirds exported to 135 countries. Currently, over 80 German companies are operating in Alabama, with investments exceeding \$10 billion since 1999.

AlabamaGermany Partnership (AGP), a statewide non-profit organization to ensure German investment in Alabama, hosted its 26th Annual Celebration Dinner in February 2024. The AGP recognized the RSA with the Rainer Bauer Award for its key role in recruiting Mercedes-Benz to Alabama. ●

MEDICAID EXPANSION CAN HELP – NOT BREAK – ALABAMA'S STATE BUDGET

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up to 10 years of data, numerous studies have been published regarding Medicaid expansion and its impacts. Across the board, these studies have found positive effects in both health outcomes **and** economic benefits. Importantly, this research has found that, in many states, the net cost of expansion in state budgets is less than the direct cost for such expansion.

Other states have found Medicaid expansion helps to offset other costs for healthcare services that states were already providing. There are three common areas where expanding Medicaid reduces state expenditures: mental health and substance abuse treatment, corrections, and uncompensated care. In Arkansas, these cost-savings helped to offset 30% of its expansion costs.

In addition to these cost-savings, Medicaid expansion states have also seen increases in revenue. Expansion

can boost revenue in three ways: expansion or provider taxes, economic boosts, and beneficiary premiums. Estimates from three states (Louisiana, Michigan, and Montana) shows the economic boosts from expansion generated new tax revenues of between 30% and 37% of the state's expansion costs.

Overall, Medicaid expansion spending has not overburdened state budgets. In fact, not one of the 40 states that made this choice has changed course to undo programs for any reason – including higher than anticipated costs. In light of this data, Alabama should consider joining the other 40 states to close the coverage gap. Closing the coverage gap can help many of the roughly 200,000 Alabama citizens currently without access to affordable health insurance with the potential to be cost neutral for the state's budget. ●

Alabama Success Stories

#WatchYourMouth

An Oral Cancer Awareness Month Campaign

There's nothing like an in-person gathering. While "virtual meeting" has become a mainstream term, the truth is, there's nothing so engaging and often productive as the random, impromptu, happenstance conversation between two strangers who quickly forge a collaborative partnership based on a common passion just because they sat down next to each other.

In 2018, a meeting of the Alabama Comprehensive Cancer Coalition culminated in that very scenario, the creation of the Oral Cancer Awareness Month campaign, **#WatchYourMouth**, envisioned by the Alabama State Dental Director, Tommy Johnson, DMD, and Casey Daniel, Ph.D., MPH, USA Health, Mitchell Cancer Institute. The campaign is intended to provide education on oral cancer, including human papillomavirus (HPV) related oral cancers, to providers utilizing a multi-faceted, medical-dental integration approach.

To their surprise, the campaign would soon become recognized by national organizations such as the American Dental Association and the Association of State and Territorial Dental Directors. The campaign would also be promoted to other states' programs by the manufacturer of the only Food and Drug Administration approved HPV vaccine for oropharyngeal cancers in the U.S. Even through referral by a dentist, the patient is protected against a total of six HPV-related cancers throughout the body in both males and females.

Statewide promotion has garnered traction as well, with such partners as the University of Alabama School of Dentistry, the Alabama Dental Association, the Board of Dental Examiners of Alabama, and a newly established partnership with VAX 2 STOP CANCER, providing free continuing education credits to licensed Alabama dental providers.

As promotion of the campaign increased, so did the creative ideas to promote its efforts. Posters and brochures were developed (and updated annually) to reflect Alabama's concerning statistics regarding incidence and mortality related to oral cancers for distribution to medical and dental offices, pharmacies, health departments, and retail storefront displays.

Laminated self-exam cards illustrating the symptoms and areas of scrutinized examination were designed with the intent of distribution for self-exams in wet environments (i.e., showers, gyms, etc.). Tee shirts and wristbands emblazoned with the **#WatchYourMouth** slogan were developed for healthcare providers to wear to initiate and promote questions regarding the campaign. Direct mailouts to over 6,000 Alabama licensed dentists and hygienists have been distributed, including information about the Alabama Tobacco Quit Line, which provides patients free access to numerous medications to assist in tobacco cessation.

Alabama semi-professional sports teams agreed to wear armbands to promote **#WatchYourMouth**. The buildings of the Retirement Systems of Alabama (RSA) were illuminated in brilliant red one night in April to increase awareness. Proclamations were granted by Governor Kay Ivey to declare April as Oral Cancer Awareness Month in Alabama. While all those efforts are worthwhile and hopefully impactful, one other stands out above

all else: that of the human element.

The **#WatchYourMouth** campaign question, "What could be better than a cure for cancer?" is best answered very simply, not needing one. For some cancers, there is protection, but there are those whose diagnosis has occurred, and protection is not an option. Just as importantly, some need to hear that protection may be possible.

In March 2023, Dr. Johnson had the pleasure of meeting the CEO of the RSA as he agreed to discuss his oral cancer diagnosis. His willingness to candidly discuss his diagnosis, subsequent treatment, and aftermath made me realize his journey would impact countless individuals regardless of demographics or socioeconomics, and it has. His voluntary contribution of a recorded interview and his encouragement of routine dental visits with oral cancer screenings have been immeasurable. The interview garnered over 600,000 digital views and 290,200 television views statewide. It is this type of commitment that will ensure the continued success of **#WatchYourMouth** and its life-saving efforts.

This is a series of articles about Alabama Success Stories. Please let us know if you have a similar success story you would like to share with the RSA membership. You may contact us at communication.correspondences@rsa-al.gov. ●

New ERS Board of Control Member Sworn In

ERS Board of Control Vice Chair Jim Fibbe administers the Oath of Office to Carol Bullard.



WANT TO HELP?



Call to request a tag at 334.517.7000 or 877.517.0020, or write:

Tag, P.O. Box 302150
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The Battle House,

A Renaissance Hotel \$129

- April 1-4, 14-16, 22-24, 28-30
- May 1-3, 5-8, 12-14, 16-19, 24-31
- June 1-8, 12-17, 21-24, 28-30

The Battle House RSA Spa Package \$244

- April 1-3, 15-16, 22-23, 29-30
- May 1, 6-8, 13-14, 27-29 • June 3-5, 12, 17, 24

Riverview Plaza \$119

- April 4-6, 14-16, 19-21, 28-30
- May 1-3, 9-11, 17-19, 24-28
- June 1-2, 7-8, 12-16, 21-24

Grand Hotel \$137 (plus a 15% resort fee)

- April 1-3, 7-9, • May 12-14, 19-20 • June 2-4, 25-27

Grand Hotel RSA Golf Package \$209 (plus a 15% resort fee)

- April 1-3, 7-9 • May 12-14, 19-20 • June 2-4, 25-27

Grand Hotel RSA Spa Package \$285 (plus a 15% resort fee)

- April 1-3, 7-9 • May 12-14, 19-20 • June 2-4, 25-27

Marriott Shoals \$119

- April 1-2, 7-8, 14-15 • May 1-2, 6-7, 27-28
- June 5-6, 12-13, 19-20

Marriott Shoals RSA Spa Package \$229

- April N/A (Closed for Renovation)
- May N/A (Closed for Renovation)
- June N/A (Closed for Renovation)

Renaissance Ross Bridge \$129

- April 1-4, 10-11, 14, 21, 23-24, 28, 30
- May 1-2, 5-6, 12, 15, 19, 27-30
- June 1-2, 5, 9-10, 16-17, 23, 30

Renaissance Ross Bridge RSA Spa Package \$260

- April 14, 21, 23 • May 5-6, 27-29 • June 16-17, 23

Auburn/Opelika Marriott Resort \$119

(plus a 10% resort fee) Web reservation will show \$144, including \$25 resort fee. Guest will only be charged RSA rate at checkout.

- April 1-4, 7-10, 28-30 • May 1, 12-13, 19, 26-30
- June 2-3, 16-17, 26-27, 30

Auburn/Opelika Marriott Resort RSA Spa Package \$234 (plus a 10% resort fee)

- April 1, 3-4, 7, 9-10, 28-29 • May 19-20, 26, 28-30
- June 2-3, 16-17, 26-27, 30

Prattville Marriott \$109

- April 7-8, 14-15, 21-22, 28
- May 3, 10-11, 17, 22-23, 26-27
- June 1-4, 12-13

Renaissance Montgomery \$129

- April 7-8, 21, 27-30 • May 5, 9-10, 27-31
- June 7-9, 13, 16, 20, 23-25

Renaissance Montgomery RSA Spa Package \$244

- April 27, 30 • May 9-10, 28-31 • June 7-8, 13, 20, 25

Specific room requests may require additional charge.

Rates available the 1st of the month and are not applicable to groups.

Corporate/Promotional Code: R2A
on www.rsa-al.gov

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Candidates Sought for ERS Board Position

Candidates are being sought for the Retired State Employee position, currently held by Norris Green. The elected member will begin their four-year term of service on October 1, 2024. Eligible candidates must be retired state employees currently receiving an ERS retirement benefit. Nomination packets, available at www.rsa-al.gov, are due to the ERS by 4:00 p.m., April 29, 2024. Please contact the Elections Coordinator at 877.517.0020 or 334.517.7192 if you have any questions. ●

TRS Board of Control Runoff Election

There will be a runoff between Mary Beth Tate, incumbent, and Pamela D. West for Teacher Position No. 3. Runoff ballots will be mailed to all eligible voters by April 9, 2024. Ballots are due to YesElections by 4:00 p.m., May 15, 2024. Election information can be found at www.rsa-al.gov. ●



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