



Vol. XLVIII—No. 12

SERVING OVER 380,000 MEMBERS

June 2023

USA Today: Mobile No. 2 Summer Vacation Spot

BY AUSTEN SHIPLEY, *YELLOWHAMMER NEWS*



When spots for summer vacations come to mind, many people don't think of Mobile, Ala., as a top destination. However, according to *USA Today*, that could be changing. The publication, on its *10Best shortlist*, recently named Mobile as its No. 2 summer vacation destination, trailing only Mackinac Island, Mich. The rest of the *10Best* are Door County, Wis.; Mystic, Conn.; Chicago; Hocking Hills, Ohio; Crystal River, Fla.; Asheville, N.C.; Rockaway Beach and Boardwalk, N.Y.; and the Shenandoah Valley, Va.

The birthplace of Mardi Gras, Mobile already has an established culture of celebration and history dating back more than 300 years. Patty Kieffer, senior vice president of Visit Mobile, said how the Azalea City received the ranking. "We had an editor from *USA Today* that came to our amazing destination and was so impressed that she decided to have Mobile as one of the nominees for this prestigious award," said Kieffer. "We were blown away, but we know that Mobile is such an amazing destination. We're just so glad that it's out nationwide and there's so many other smaller destinations that are also getting some recognition about the uniqueness of their destination. This was a nationwide vote – it had a lot to do with the family-friendly destination that we are." ●

Alabama: Who Has the Power?

BY DAVID G. BRONNER

At one time or another, you have heard that Alabama has the longest and most out-of-date state constitution in America. My first General Counsel for the RSA, William T. Stephens, a Harvard law grad, tried his hardest to improve the 1901 relic; only one article was changed!

Unlike many states, the Alabama State Constitution gives most of the state's power to the Alabama Legislature and not the governor. Our governors cannot veto legislation because the simple majority that passed the legislation can override the veto without one additional vote! We all know this, so what?

Alabama must have strong leadership from its Legislature or our progress is limited! Does this Legislature really want to spend the most funds Alabama has ever had on real BUT minor problems or attack the major problems instead? Allowing overtime to be exempt from taxes (which I have never heard of any other state doing), but not expanding the best Pre-K program in America. Cutting grocery taxes by ONE percent or less, when the tax is 10%, and then expect jubilation from Alabamians. Why not improve education for our children?

How many of us would not choose to solve the huge medical problem of 230,000 vulnerable Alabamians without health insurance and the closing of rural hospitals, when you only need 10 cents for every 90 cents Uncle Sam will give us to solve these major problems.

Adopt the Arkansas solution of funding these problems for Alabamians' long-term prosperity. Arkansas' Medicaid expansion program is now called ARHOME – the Arkansas Health and Opportunity for Me – and provides healthcare coverage to about 340,000 low-income Arkansans. The federal government pays for 90% of the cost of the Medicaid expansion program, and the state covers the rest of the tab. In fiscal 2023 that started July 1, the state Department of Human Services forecasts spending \$2.67 billion for ARHOME with the state share of about \$267 million. ●

A Billion Dollars for a Prison Means Less Money for Everything Else

BY CARLA CROWDER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ALABAMA APPLESEED CENTER FOR LAW & JUSTICE

An examination of recent state spending priorities reveals a disturbing trend — our elected officials are willing to pour an incredible amount of our tax dollars into punishing the people of Alabama. Prisons and punishment take priority over so many needs that would make our state safer, healthier, and more prosperous.

Take new prison construction, for instance. Last month, officials approved a resolution increasing the cap from the previously approved \$623 million to a staggering \$975 million for constructing a supersize prison in Elmore County. Undeniably a poor state with a limited tax base, Alabama will soon become one of the only states in the U.S. with a billion-dollar prison. Given that many existing prisons have fallen into disrepair and the system is at 168% capacity, some new construction was inevitable. But sinking so much money into buildings limits available resources into what incarcerated people need and taxpayers deserve for this investment — rehabilitative programs, classes, and services so people leave prison better than when they arrived.

And there's much, much more. The Alabama Department of Corrections signed a \$1.06 billion healthcare contract with YesCare, a private healthcare company linked to ADOC's previous

provider, Corizon, that recently declared bankruptcy. YesCare also has close ties to a private attorney who has billed the state millions for defending the status quo at the ADOC. Massive healthcare costs are one of the drivers of ADOC's \$700 million annual budget.

Altogether, Alabama is looking at \$3 billion in costs for a prison system that has been declared unconstitutional by the United States Department of Justice. As a result, crucial services go unfunded so that mountains of our tax dollars can be burned on giant new prisons that would be operated by a Department of Corrections whose current, smaller prisons are woefully understaffed. That chronic understaffing has fueled the violence that led to the DOJ investigation, and four years after the first federal report was released, staffing has only gotten worse.

Instead of expensive prisons, let's invest in Alabama's children. The child-care crisis is hurting parents and our economy. Current policies and limited reimbursements are not enough to support parents who want to return to the workforce.

Speaking of children, perhaps Alabama could pay social workers at the Department of Human Resources higher salaries to stem the 54% turnover rate. DHR is desperate for staff to handle

child abuse and neglect cases. In fact, the entire DHR General Fund budget allocation is \$105 million, a fraction of what is given to ADOC.

Who else is getting short-changed by Alabama's funding priorities? Victims. For years, zero dollars from the General Fund went to the Alabama Victims Compensation Commission, which is supposed to help crime victims with expenses such as funerals and counseling. Finally, the commission will receive state funding, but it appears to be less than \$1 million this year.

How about Medicaid expansion, which would extend health insurance to 280,000 hard-working Alabamians? State leaders constantly tell us that we can't afford it, but it would cost \$225 million annually. In other words: less than 25% of that billion-dollar prison.

Clearly, incarceration is expensive. What's less clear is whether this massive outpouring of our tax dollars will make us safer, given that people only go to prison after the harm of a crime occurs. True public safety would focus on preventing that harm in the first place.

Carla Crowder, an Alabama attorney, is the Executive Director of Alabama Appleseed Center for Law & Justice, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and policy organization based in Montgomery. ●

FBI Issues Warning

The Federal Bureau of Investigation is warning people against using free phone charging stations at places like airports and shopping centers. In a tweet from its Denver office, the FBI said "bad actors" can use the devices to steal your data.

"Avoid using free charging stations in airports, hotels, or shopping centers. Bad actors have figured out ways to use public USB ports to introduce malware and monitoring software onto devices. Carry your own charger and USB cord and use an electrical outlet instead," the agency said. ●

The Wall Street Journal Features RSA's Development

BY MARK FAGAN

The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) article on April 27, 2023, "Priced Out of Florida, More Retirees Are Trying This Sunbelt State on For Size" highlighted Alabama's Baldwin County Gulf Coast and Eastern Shore as good retirement options. The RSA's Colony at The Grand was featured. The Colony at The Grand is the 300-acre residential component of the RSA's 834-acre mixed-use development which includes the Grand Hotel Golf Resort & Spa, Autograph Collection and The Lakewood Club in Fairhope.

Residents of The Colony at The Grand have access to 36 golf holes, a golf practice facility, ten lighted tennis courts, fitness center, a restaurant, and the 17-acre Sweetwater Lake. There is a zero-entry main pool, a lap pool, large hot tub, splash park with geysers, a 20-foot-high water slide, and a lazy river. There is a long walking trail around the lake and through the live oaks. A new Southern Croquet Court opened in 2022, and pickleball courts are expected to open in 2023.

Residents also have access to the

Grand Hotel with its five restaurants and two lounges, two beaches, indoor pool, outdoor pool complex with slide, fitness center, fishing pier, and a 37-slip marina. Its 20,000 sf European Spa includes a quiet room, steam room, sauna, hot tub, and complete salon services.

The RSA purchased the Grand Hotel and The Lakewood Club in 1999 and in 2004, partnered with Daniel Corporation to develop The Colony at The Grand. The 9-floor Bayview II condo building

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Alabama Success Story

The Homecoming of Wild Alabama

BY JANICE BARRETT, OUTREACH AND EDUCATION COORDINATOR

There must be a word for that feeling of homecoming when one has not left home. When I try to express how it feels for our newly independent organization to again claim the name of Wild Alabama, I find myself searching for a word to describe that feeling of coming home, with the odd twist of never having left.

The rebirthing of Wild Alabama is a deepening of our roots in the fertile soil of our thirty-one-year history as a 501(c)(3) non-profit forest protection organization. Wild Alabama's legacy of forest protection on public lands started when the fight for Alabama's last wild places that had begun in the 1980s in the Bankhead National Forest was formalized as a non-profit organization called the Bankhead Monitor. In the fall of 1991, Lamar Marshall published the first *Bankhead Monitor*, a simple single-sheet newsletter that, within a year, blossomed into a full-color magazine. Through the years and decades, the magazine's name dutifully reflected the organization's name changes and growth, from *Wild Alabama* in 1997 to *Wild South* in 2004. In the 2007 merger with North Carolina's Southern Appalachian Biodiversity Project, the Wild South name was kept, and we became a regional organization. Our base of operations became Asheville, North Carolina. Wild South staff and volunteers kept the work strong in Alabama for Bankhead and Talladega

National Forests and all three wilderness areas, Sipsey, Cheaha, and Dugger Mountain.



Over time, needs changed, and Wild Alabama was reborn as an independent organization in January 2021. In that first year of growth, under the leadership of Executive Director Maggie Johnston, formerly the Director at McDowell Environmental Center, and a fantastic Board of Directors led by Michael Yancey, Wild Alabama went from zero in our coffers to an income of \$250,000 by the end of the year. We increased our staff from two to seven. On February 1 of this year, Wild Alabama was awarded a \$96,000 Legacy Trails grant to pay a consultant to assess trail conditions in Sipsey Wilderness. The consultant will also train Wild Alabama staff, volunteers, and Forest Service personnel in the most effective long-term repair and maintenance techniques.

Wild Alabama is committed to strengthening our work and our reach in Alabama, our home that we never left. With the help of our growing force of volunteers and every forest lover who

expresses their trust in us by donating time and money, Wild Alabama continues to inspire people to enjoy, value, and protect our national forests, wilderness areas, and other wild places. Since our change back to Wild Alabama, we have witnessed growth in every aspect of our work. In monitoring Forest Service management of our national forests and wilderness areas, partnering with the Forest Service on projects, leading hikes, field trips, and forest bathing walks, creating community science programs, and providing many opportunities for stewardship, people of all ages are included in the protection of our wildest and most bio-diverse places.

Moving forward in service to our forests and wild places, Wild Alabama staff stands with profound respect and gratitude on the shoulders of the heroes, leaders, and warriors who came before us, and we vow to keep our shoulders strong for those who will come after us.

For more information or to sign up for occasional emails about events and work days, go to www.wildal.org and add your name to the growing list who love and enjoy wild places in Alabama.

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. ●

CONTINUED FROM PAGE TWO

with 56 condos opened in 2008. The RSA partnered with Stuart Contracting in 2011 to develop detached houses at The Colony at The Grand. Road and housing construction proceeded in phases. There were more than 300 houses built and occupied (early 2023) with 70 houses under construction and 40 houses waiting to start through Phase VII.

The Lakewood Club has hosted numerous golf championships over the last 50 years. These include two USGA Senior Women's Amateur Championships (the last one was September 2021). The club has hosted 10 Alabama Golf Association Championships.

The Colony at The Grand was

selected in 2018 for the Seal of Approval Program of the American Association of Retirement Communities and received "Best in Class" recognition as a community with amenities providing a high-quality lifestyle for retirees. The Colony at The Grand development team has won numerous awards from the National Association of Home Builders and the only Gold Awards won by any Alabama firm. The Colony at The Grand won over communities in Canada, Illinois, Kentucky, Delaware, and South Carolina. The Colony at The Grand was also featured in *Alabama Magazine* for September/October 2022.

It is good to see the *WSJ* give Alabama the national recognition it has

earned as a good place for retirees. My colleagues and I (at Jacksonville State University) worked with ADECA in 1989 to establish the first state-wide program in a state government to attract retirees for economic development. Retirees provide positive economic impact and are the only population group who pay more in taxes than they cost for services. Florida was a popular retirement state, and we thought Alabama could compete, so we began targeting "Florida's backwash" of retirees. States like North Carolina and South Carolina were marketing to the "half backs" (retirees who had moved from the east coast of the U.S. to Florida but found the move as too dramatic). ●

Start Planning Your Summer Getaways at RSA's Outstanding Hotels, Spas, and RTJ Golf



Member Hotel
Discounts Webpage

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ENJOY YOUR SUMMER
A Special Deal
FOR RSA MEMBERS

The Battle House,

A Renaissance Hotel \$129

- June 1-10, 14-20, 25-30
- July 1-3, 5-13, 21-23, 29-31 • August 1-4, 9, 13-26

The Battle House RSA Spa Package \$244

- June 5-7, 14, 26-28 • July 3, 5, 10-12, 31
- August 1-2, 9, 14-16, 21-23

Riverview Plaza \$119

- June 1-3, 9-10, 14-15, 17-20, 25-28
- July 2-3, 21-24, 27-31 • August 1-3, 9, 13-21, 25-27

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

- June 1, 4, 6, 21, 26 • July 6, 27
- August 6-7, 13-14, 20-23, 29-30

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

- June 1, 4, 6, 21, 26 • July 6, 27
- August 6-7, 13-14, 20-23, 29-30

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

- June 1, 6, 21, 26 • July 6, 27 • August 18, 23, 29-30

Marriott Shoals \$119

- June 4, 11, 18-19, 25 • July 5-6, 16, 23, 30
- August 6, 13, 20, 27-28

Marriott Shoals RSA Spa Package \$229

- June 4, 11, 18-19, 25 • July 5-6, 16, 23, 30
- August 6, 13, 20, 27-28

Renaissance Ross Bridge \$129

- June 4, 7-8, 11, 18, 25, 28-29
- July 3-4, 9-10, 30-31 • August 6, 13, 20, 27, 30-31

Renaissance Ross Bridge RSA Spa Package \$260

- June 4, 7, 25, 28 • July 16, 23 • August 20, 27, 30

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.

- June 5-7, 26-28 • July 4-6, 11-12, 31
- August 1, 7-8, 14-15

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

- June 5, 7, 26, 28 • July 5-6, 12, 31 • August 1, 8, 15

Prattville Marriott \$99

- June 1, 4, 10-11, 29 • July 2-5, 9, 30
- August 6-7, 13-15

Renaissance Montgomery \$129

- June 4, 11-12, 18, 25 • July 2-5, 9, 30
- August 6-7, 10, 13-14

Renaissance Montgomery RSA Spa Package \$244

- June N/A • July 4-5 • August 10

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
Book Online and Save RSA \$4.



TRS Board of Control Election Results

Congratulations to Luke Hallmark on his reelection to the Superintendent Position and to Anita Gibson on her reelection to the Retired Position No. 2! Their three-year terms will begin July 1, 2023. ●

Make Your Vote Count ERS Board of Control Election

As of the nomination deadline of April 29, 2023, the following two incumbents on the Employees' Retirement System (ERS) Board of Control were unopposed: Lindsey Ward for the Active State Employee Position No. 2, and Lisa Statum for the Active Other Local Position (formerly Active Local Position No. 2).

Regular election ballots for the Retired Local Position, held by Jim Fibbe, will be mailed by June 5, 2023, and must be returned to YesElections no later than 4:00 p.m., July 17, 2023. The elected member and those unopposed will begin their four-year term of service on October 1, 2023.

Elected members to the ERS Board will only be elected by members from the same category of the retirement system. To be eligible to vote for the Retired Local Position, you must be a retired employee of a city, county, or public agency and currently receiving an ERS retirement benefit.

Eligible members will be able to vote by mail, phone, or the internet. Instructions will be included with the paper ballot. More information about the candidates can be found on the RSA website.

By submitting your vote, you are confirming that you are eligible to vote for the position based on your classification. If your classification is incorrect, please contact the Elections Coordinator at 334.517.7192 or 877.517.0020. ●



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