



The ADVISOR

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Hospitals Are Bleeding Red Montgomery Is Not Immune

JEFF MARTIN, MONTGOMERY INDEPENDENT

Alabama is one of only 10 states that has refused to expand Medicaid, which has had a direct negative impact on the healthcare of its citizens. Since 2011, 14 hospitals have closed and 70% of all the state's hospitals are operating in the red.

Is Montgomery's Jackson Hospital about to become number 15? The not-for-profit organization that opened in 1946 is a 344-bed acute care hospital and employs about 3,000 people. Also affected would be The Jackson Clinic, the area's largest multi-specialty clinic, and both the Jackson Imaging and Surgery Center. The closure would be the largest Alabama has seen since Carraway Methodist Medical Center in Birmingham fifteen years ago....

It wouldn't be the first Montgomery hospital to shutter. Founded in 1902, St. Margaret's Hospital, once located two blocks from the state capitol, closed in 1996. Located in a poorer section of town and run by Catholic nuns who refused to turn away indigent patients, there was little appetite to save it. It was lower-class that used the 250-bed hospital, while the middle and upper class moved their business to Baptist and Jackson.

With no Medicaid expansion in sight and having lost nearly one billion in documented unreimbursed expenses during the pandemic, Alabama's hospitals are going bankrupt at rapid speed, especially in rural counties. The expansion of Medicaid has been proven to not only save hospitals, but also save lives.

Alabama's political leaders have

long claimed that Alabama cannot afford expanding Medicaid, but the truth is the price of just one new prison currently being built would likely cover the extra cost for decades and would provide health coverage for more than 300,000 uninsured Alabamians. In fact, the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama has reported that expanding Medicaid would save the state almost \$400 million annually over the next six years and have an average positive economic impact of \$1.89 billion per year. It would also be a lifeline to Jackson.

Medicaid expansion would decrease the likelihood of rural hospital closures by 62%, according to a study by Alabama Arise. Currently, more than half of Alabama's hospitals are in danger of closing, with 19 hospitals at immediate risk. Eight counties currently do not have a hospital.

The lack of Medicaid expansion, along with low reimbursement rates from insurance companies, has also caused a steep decline in hospitals with labor and delivery units. Almost a third of all Alabama women now live more than 30 minutes away from a hospital that delivers babies. In some counties, a woman must travel about 80 minutes to have her baby delivered. I guess it shouldn't come as a surprise that Black and Hispanic women are affected the most.

Currently, 25 counties do not have obstetrics and another 21 have low

School Vouchers vs. Education Savings Accounts

EDITORIAL

Education savings accounts (ESAs) are being touted by certain advocacy groups across the country as the next best thing in "school choice." However, ESAs appear to be a more extreme version of school vouchers without any accountability or oversight.

Unlike school vouchers, which traditionally allow payment of private school tuition from public funds, ESAs allow parents to receive public funds directly to a savings account (even those parents with serious financial, substance abuse, and/or gambling problems), which can then be used to pay for their child's educational expenses. These allowable expenses are much broader than just tuition and can include online learning programs, private tutoring, textbooks, computer software, and transportation. Not surprisingly, there have already been multiple reports of fraud and abuse in states with ESAs, such as Arizona and Florida.

Also, unlike voucher programs, there is no accountability for the private schools and organizations that might receive the public monies from ESAs. Could this lead to a free-for-all of unregulated education vendors and pop-up private schools looking to cash in on this opportunity with little to no regard for the educational outcomes of their programs and services?

This lack of accountability is concerning for the children, taxpayers, and the state. There must be accountability tied to these important tax dollars in the same way that we hold public education accountable for how it spends taxpayer monies. Because if ESAs fail our children, the state will ultimately become responsible for these failures and the taxpayers will be on the hook. ●

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Ross Bridge Golf Course Reopens

BY MARK FAGAN

The Renaissance Birmingham Ross Bridge Golf Resort & Spa (RB) with its 18-hole golf course opened in 2005 as the 11th site of RSA's Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail. The golf course was closed in September 2022 due to an herbicidal mistake on 14 greens. Upgrades to the greens, bunkers, and cart paths for this 18-year-old course were completed and the course reopened on October 13, 2023. The putting surfaces were switched from bent grass to TifEagle Bermuda grass; a more heat tolerant ultradwarf grass with smaller grass blades and firmer surfaces for faster ball speeds. Bunkers were made smaller and shallower and cart paths were moved closer to greens to reduce walking. Five of the holes received architectural improvements.

This 310-acre, 8,100-yard golf course (4th longest in the world) is considered the Crown Jewel of the Trail. Ten holes play around two man-made lakes connected by a waterfall stretching 800 ft with an 80-ft elevation change. A long iron bridge and a gristmill made of stone are added features on the course. A bagpiper plays at sunset to call the golfers home. RB hosted the Regions

Charity Classic (PGA Tour Champions) from 2006 through 2010.

RB's 6-story, 270-room hotel compares to the Fairmont Banff Springs Resort in Alberta, Canada. The exterior has stone masonry, mansard roofs, stucco, towers, pre-cast arches, balconies, and castle turrets. Each room has a balcony overlooking the RB golf course. The interior has limestone floors, trimmed dark

cherry wood, wood beams, carpet from Holland, vanities from China, and tile from Egypt. There is a 12,000-sf terrace with gas firepits. RB includes a 14,000-sf conference center with ballroom, a 12,000-sf spa with 10 treatment rooms, golf shop, pool complex, indoor pool/fitness, two restaurants, sports bar, and tennis courts. The outdoor pool complex features a cascading waterfall.

RB was recognized as Alabama's Best Golf Hotel at the 8th Annual *World Golf Awards* Ceremony at Dubai in 2021. RB ranked 11th in guest satisfaction out of 87 Marriott Renaissance hotels in North America. USA Today's *Golfweek* ranked the RB golf course as the fifth best public golf course in Alabama. RB's golf course is a favorite of *Golf Digest* while *GOLF Magazine*

named RB as one of the top golf resorts in America. Mike May, an international travel/golf writer, rated RB's golf course as one of the four Best Alabama Golf Courses.

RB has been rated the number six Renaissance Hotel in the U.S. for meetings. RB has received the following awards: Top 500 Hotels in the World by *Travel and Leisure*; One of the Top 50 19th Holes in the U.S. by

GOLF Magazine; Best Golf Resorts Silver Award by *GOLF Magazine*; Wine Spectator Award; and America's Top Golf Courses by *Zagat*. RB's spa has been named number 4 in the nation by *Best Spas* magazine.

RB is less than two miles from the RSA's 54-hole Oxmoor Valley complex, which opened in 1992 as the first site on the Trail. Oxmoor Valley's Ridge Course is nestled between Red Mountain and Shades Mountain and has 150 ft of elevation changes with shots over ravines to roller coaster, tree-lined fairways. The Ridge Course was ranked the 7th Best Alabama Public Course by *Golfweek*. The Valley Course stretches two miles down a ridge through a slender valley with creeks and lakes and back up the ridge. Its total renovation in 2021 included changing the greens to TifEagle, leveling some fairways and green complexes, and adding forward tee boxes for shorter hole options.

Oxmoor Valley's Short Course was recently remade. It changed from the initial 147-acre, 18 par-3 holes to the 14-acre, 9 par-3 holes (walking only). The name was changed to the Back Yard, and it can be played in around one hour. This course features holes ranging from 73 yards to 132 yards and a total of five bunkers. The greens are TifEagle with areas that allow for running balls up on the green. All the holes, except the last one, were routed downhill for optimal walking comfort. ●



HOSPITALS ARE BLEEDING RED MONTGOMERY IS NOT IMMUNE

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access to maternity care, evidenced in a 2022 March of Dimes report. Shocker – Alabama has the sixth-highest infant mortality rate in the nation. Next month, Shelby County will become the largest county in the state without maternity care when Shelby Baptist closes its obstetrics departments.

Meanwhile, our state politicians are more concerned about prosecuting healthcare providers who help Alabamians travel to another state to have a legal abortion. Priorities, right? ●

Alabama Success Stories

Rare Fossil Whale Unearthed by Alabama High School Student

BY ALLYSON MCMAKEN, DIRECTOR OF EXTERNAL RELATIONS, ALABAMA SCHOOL OF MATH AND SCIENCE

A high school student and her biology teacher recently discovered a 30-million-year-old fossilized whale skeleton on a farm owned by the student's family in Monroe County, about 80 miles north of Mobile. The whale, which could be 20 feet long, will take at least three to four years to excavate and could be a first-of-its-kind find in Alabama.

Lindsey Stallworth, now a junior at the Alabama School of Math and Science (ASMS) in Mobile, has been collecting fossils on her family's land for as long as she can remember. "We would go out and pick up shark teeth and fossil shells, but we never knew anyone that could tell us anything about them," said Stallworth. "We just thought they were cool."

Fortunately, one of the biology faculty members at ASMS, Dr. Andrew Gentry, is a paleontologist who has studied Alabama fossils since childhood. He is part of a distinguished three-member department at the school, and just last year, Gentry made headlines for leading the research into a previously unknown species of giant freshwater turtle that inhabited the state during the time of the dinosaurs.

After learning of Dr. Gentry's research interests, Stallworth brought a few of the fossils she had collected to class to see if her professor could tell her more about them. "I immediately recognized one of the fossil shark teeth Lindsey showed me," said Gentry, "and I wanted to know more about where she found it."

Once school ended for the summer, Gentry traveled to the Stallworth's farm and was amazed by the quantity and variety of fossils on the property. "I've been collecting fossils in Alabama for more than 30 years, and this was easily one of the best fossil sites I've seen anywhere in the state," Gentry said. After only a

few hours of searching, Gentry says he noticed tiny pieces of fossilized bone scattered over a small hillside. "I followed the trail of bone fragments up the hill, and it led right to several large bones eroding out of the soil."



Lindsey Stallworth in the Makerspace research lab

Gentry, Stallworth, and a few helpers spent most of June and July carefully excavating the fossilized remains and transporting them back to ASMS's newly renovated Makerspace, where students and faculty collaborate on projects while sharing ideas, equipment, and knowledge. The ASMS Makerspace houses a robotics studio, a paleontology lab, and a classroom for STEM research.

Due to the whale's size, the team has only recovered the skull so far but plans to return next summer to excavate more of the skeleton. "If the complete skeleton is there, it could take several years before we have the entire animal back in the lab," Gentry said.

Thanks to a unique Research Fellows Program available to high-achieving students at ASMS, Stallworth can now work alongside Dr. Gentry cleaning, repairing, and studying the fossil whale. "The Research Fellows Program allows Lindsey to gain real-world experience in scientific research and even present that research at professional conferences," says Gentry. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a high school student to stand out when applying to college and maybe even discover a new career path."

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. ●

Candidates Sought for Four TRS Board Positions

Candidates are being sought for four positions on the TRS Board of Control: Teacher No. 3, held by Mary Beth Tate; Support Personnel No. 2, held by Amy Knight Fowler; Principal, held by Thomas E. Jones; and Higher Education No. 2, held by Kelli Shomaker. The election will take place in January 2024. Elected members will begin their three-year term of service on July 1, 2024.

Nomination packets are available at www.rsa-al.gov or by contacting the Elections Coordinator at 334.517.7192 or 877.517.0020. The completed packet must be returned to the TRS office no later than 4:00 p.m., December 4, 2023. ●

Local Governments – Retiree Bonuses

This past session, the Legislature passed a bill to give a second chance for local governments, such as cities and counties, to give the retiree bonus that the Legislature authorized in 2022. This bonus was paid last year to all state and education retirees and to the local retirees of the 484 local governments that authorized such payment by the initial deadline.

Forty four local governments took advantage of this second chance and authorized the bonus for their retirees. The bonus for these local retirees will be paid out in December. **This is only for the local retirees** who did not receive a bonus last year and whose former local government employer authorized the bonus before October 31. ●

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**The Battle House,
A Renaissance Hotel \$129**
• November 1-2, 5-9, 12-16, 19-28
• December 2-6, 9-11, 23-30
• January 1-7, 13-15, 18-24

The Battle House RSA Spa Package \$244
• November 1, 6-8, 13-15, 20-22, 27-28
• December 4-6, 11, 27 • January 2-3, 15, 22-24

Riverview Plaza \$119
• November 1-2, 5-9, 11-14, 22-28
• December 10-18, 23-30 • January 1-5, 14-17, 20-23

Grand Hotel (plus a 15% resort fee) \$137
• November 8-9, 12-13, 20-21, 26-30
• December 3-5, 10-14, 17-20
• January 2-4, 7-11, 21-24, 30-31

Grand Hotel RSA Golf Package (plus a 15% resort fee) \$209
• November 5, 8-9, 12-13, 20-21, 26-30
• December 3-5, 10-14, 17-20
• January 2-4, 7-11, 21-24, 30-31

**Grand Hotel RSA Spa Package \$285
(plus a 15% resort fee)**
• November 5, 8-9, 12-13, 20-21, 26-30
• December 3-5, 10-14, 17-20
• January 2-4, 7-11, 21-24, 30-31

Marriott Shoals \$119
• November 5-6, 19-23, 26-29
• December 17-28 • January 1-7, 14-18, 21-22

Marriott Shoals RSA Spa Package \$229
• November 5-6, 12, 19-23, 26-29
• December 3, 10, 17-23, 27-28
• January 2-7, 11, 14-18, 21-22

Renaissance Ross Bridge \$129
• November 5-6, 19-30 • December 3-4, 10-21, 24-28
• January 1-4, 7-11, 14-15

Renaissance Ross Bridge RSA Spa Package \$260
• November 5-6, 12, 19-22, 26-29
• December 3, 10-13, 17-20
• January 7-10, 14-15, 21, 28

**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.**
• November 5-8, 12-15, 19-22, 27-30
• December 3-6, 11-14, 18-30
• January 1-11, 14-15, 17-18

Auburn/Opelika Marriott Resort RSA Spa Package \$234 (plus a 10% resort fee)
• November 5-6, 8, 12-13, 15, 19-20, 22, 27, 29-30
• December 3-4, 6, 11, 13-14, 18, 20-23, 27-30
• January 3-8, 10-11, 14-15, 17-18, 28

Prattville Marriott \$109
• November 5-6, 19-21, 26-27
• December 3-4, 10-11, 17-21, 24-28
• January 1-4, 14-15, 21-22

Renaissance Montgomery \$129
• November 5-6, 19-21, 25-27
• December 17-18, 24-28 • January 1-4, 7-8

Renaissance Montgomery RSA Spa Package \$244
• November 21, 25, 27 • December 18, 26-28
• January 1-4

Specific room requests may require additional charge.
Rates available the 1st of the month and
are not applicable to groups.

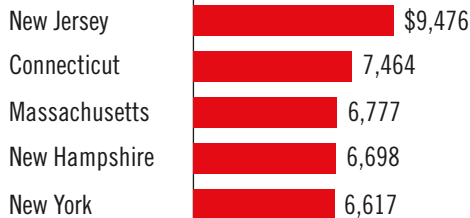
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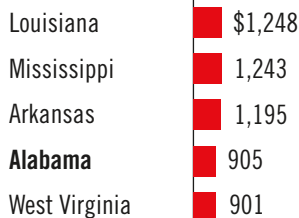
X @RSAALGOV

Average Annual Property Tax for a single-family home by state

Highest



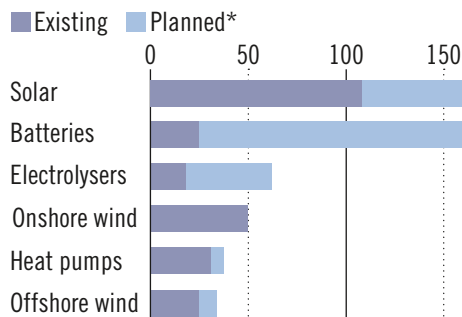
Lowest



Source: Attom Data Solutions

Powering Up

World, renewable-energy capacity, 2022
% of 2030 demand



Source: Energy Transitions Commission

*At June 2023



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