



Foreword

My Vision for a Golf Trail in Alabama

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I started managing the pension fund for state employees and state teachers in Alabama in 1973. I recognized that to make the pension fund stronger, the economy in Alabama needed to be stronger. By 1990, I was growing frustrated with the economic conditions in Alabama.

I wanted to improve Alabama and help ourselves so others would want to join us. I wanted to feature Alabama's natural beauty. I wanted to enhance the image of Alabama. I wanted to promote economic development in Alabama. I wanted something of which all Alabamians could be proud. I wanted something no other state had.

I decided to build world-class golf courses and world-class hotels to increase tourism and create residential and commercial development.

I envisioned a series of golf courses and hotels all through Alabama that could be called a "golf trail." The golf trail concept would be needed to get people to come to Alabama from long distances and to spend ample time in the state. To sustain play on the courses, we would need them in our more populated areas. But a golf trail concept dictated that we have sites within a short drive of each other. This meant building some courses in the more rural scenic areas to prevent long driving

times and provide a connection for all of the sites.

I decided not to do 18-hole complexes, but to do 54-hole or 36-hole complexes. I wanted each site to be different. I wanted to choose spectacular land and give the architect a clean slate to design the courses without regard to using the best property for real estate development along the golf holes. I wanted pristine golf to attract tourists from all over the nation and world.

I wanted the best golf course architect. Robert Trent Jones Sr. had a career of six decades designing golf courses and he had already worked on well over 400 courses around the United States and two dozen foreign countries by the time I approached him to help us. Jones quickly understood that I was serious about developing a series world-class golf courses as a golf trail and that I wanted the courses to be difficult and memorable and to compare with any other championship courses in the world with beauty and quality. He readily agreed.

Once we built the golf courses, we would need nice places for people to stay while playing our courses. I wanted accompanying hotels with facilities as nice as any in the world. I wanted them to have architectural beauty and attractiveness.

I wanted the local people at each site to have

ownership and for it to be “our” site and not RSA’s or SunBelt’s site. Because of this, I wanted each site on the golf trail to contribute resources such as land, access roads, and utilities. I wanted local participation from the beginning to build in this sense of proprietorship so the local community would be committed to helping the site succeed.

The Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail

In the end, we developed the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail (the Trail)—11 golf sites with a total of 26 golf courses (468 holes) and eight resort hotels with a total of 2,065 rooms. The hotels have 20 restaurants and lounges and five of these hotels have world-class spas that provide complete spa treatments and salon services. The hotels use thousands of square feet of meeting space to host hundreds of national and international meetings each year.

We used the 47 television stations and 100 local newspapers owned by the RSA to promote the Trail. We have put information about the Trail in front of millions of people for many years. People

Dr. David G. Bronner has served as CEO of the Retirement Systems of Alabama (RSA) since he joined the organization in 1973. He holds PhD and JD degrees and was assistant dean of the University of Alabama Law School before coming to RSA. He has guided RSA from \$500 million in assets to its current \$38 billion under management. He envisioned the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail and directed RSA’s investment in its golf complexes, hotels, and spas. He also financed the television stations and newspapers that have provided free advertising for Alabama, helping tourism spending in Alabama increase by almost \$9 billion a year.

wanted to come to Alabama because they heard of it through our promotional efforts.

The courses on the Trail are as nice as any in the world. Robert Trent Jones Sr. called the Trail his biggest accomplishment. Bobby Vaughan and Roger Rulewich deserve the most credit for the construction of the golf courses on the Trail.

Our hotels compare favorably to hotels anywhere in the world. Our hotel at Ross Bridge is modeled after the hotel in Banff Springs in the Canadian Rockies and our hotel in the Shoals is similar to the one at Lake Louise in Canada. Our Grand Hotel and our Battle House Hotel are examples of great old historical hotels that we have restored to their original grandeur. Our Renaissance hotel in Montgomery, modeled after the Plaza in New York City, is a state-of-the-art modern property with an adjoining performing arts center that is as nice as any theatre on Broadway.

The service at our hotels has produced many awards. The 2014 guest satisfaction surveys at Marriott and Renaissance hotels in North America rated four of our hotels in the top five of their 448 full-service hotels. The Renaissance Ross Bridge Golf Resort & Spa was named the number one Marriott or Renaissance hotel in North America for golf satisfaction. The Auburn/Opelika Marriott Hotel and Conference Center at Grand National finished second for golf. The Marriott in Prattville at Capitol Hill finished fourth and the Grand Hotel Marriott Resort in Point Clear finished fifth for golf experience.

Mobile’s Battle House Renaissance Hotel & Spa has been named one of the “Top 500 Hotels in the World” for 2015 by *Travel + Leisure* magazine. The Battle House’s overall score ranked higher than all these famous hotels: Beverly Wilshire, Ritz-Carlton Fort Lauderdale, Disney’s Polynesian Resort,

JW Marriott Marquis Miami, InterContinental Buckhead Atlanta, Ritz-Carlton Lodge Reynolds Plantation, Ko'a Kea Hotel & Resort in Hawaii, Four Seasons St. Louis, ARIA in Las Vegas, Ritz-Carlton New York Battery Park, St. Regis Houston, and Four Seasons Resort Dallas. The internationally renowned travel publication called the Battle House a "beaux-arts landmark in the city's historic downtown," blending "old-world grandeur with modern amenities, including a new 10,000-square-foot spa." The magazine's "insider tip" also encourages patrons to "order the seared salmon salad under the Trellis Room's restored stained-glass cathedral ceiling." The Battle House is the only Alabama hotel on the 2015 list.

The Trail hosts LPGA events annually at Magnolia Grove and Capitol Hill. The Trail hosted its first PGA event in July 2015. The Barbasol Championship was the first PGA tournament in Alabama since 1990. It was played at the Lakes Course at Grand National in Opelika with a four-year contract. The tournament was broadcast on television for four days to more than 110 countries. This tournament was included in the FedExCup competition with 300 points awarded to the winner.

The Trail has given Alabama recreational and hospitality amenities comparable to anywhere in the world. The retirement opportunities in Alabama have become as attractive as at any place in the nation.

The RSA hotels on the Trail helped to revitalize downtowns in Montgomery and Mobile. Alabama now has cities that can compete favorably for large conferences and conventions. The meetings of these large groups introduce to Alabama tourists who might never have visited without such attractive accommodations.

We are now finished with developing golf

courses for the Trail in Alabama. I do not think the Trail with its golf courses and hotels will be duplicated because nobody will want to risk the money. It has given Alabama something not found in any other state.

The Trail gave Alabama a tool for recruiting industry and enhancing the image of the state. The relationships built in the local areas helped us all work together to bring industry, to construct and remodel buildings, and to erect housing. These relationships have produced a tremendous economic benefit for Alabama.

I have worked on many investments and economic development projects during my four decades as CEO of the RSA. The Trail hotels, golf courses, and ancillary development compose the project of which I am the most proud.

The Trail's History and Impact

This book is worthy of the history it recounts. I am delighted to have such a great book on the story of the Trail. This book is a testament to all the people who worked so hard on the Trail. This book does a marvelous job of presenting the story of the Trail, including all 11 golf sites and 8 hotels. It documents all the work done by the many people that have helped to develop and operate the Trail.

It is the reference book about the Trail. It could be considered the encyclopedia of the Trail. It could be used in teaching business law, finance, and political science.

When you read further into *The Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail: Its History and Impact*, you will gain a greater understanding and appreciation of this mammoth project that has greatly impacted the history and economy of Alabama over the last 25 years. The history and impact of the Trail as ex-

plicated in this book will enhance the experience of the visitors as they visit our golf courses and hotels.

The Author

Nobody is better prepared than Dr. Mark Fagan to write the history and impact of the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail. He saw something nobody else saw with his vision for attracting retirees for economic development. His research on the economic impact of retirees contributed significantly to the concept of developing the Trail as a strategy for economic development in Alabama. He cared enough about Alabama to work hard to help the Trail become a reality.

Fagan has developed a national reputation for his work on retiree migration and retirement areas. He first worked with the older guys who were the former experts and learned from them. Eventually, he became “the guy.”

Fagan provided great assistance through the years for the development of the Trail. He did the projected economic impact studies for many of the sites on the Trail. These studies were used to gain approval from the necessary parties. These studies were also used to justify the Trail as a component of the tourism and retirement industry which allowed for the use of state money to construct ac-

cess roads to some of the clubhouses on the Trail.

He met with state and local officials to gain their support for sites on the Trail. He recruited developers of retirement resorts to sites on the Trail. He wrote articles and made presentations about the Trail. Fagan directly helped with the negotiations for the Trail sites at Silver Lakes and the Shoals. He was intensely involved with the negotiations for the proposed course at Orange Beach that was not built due to a lawsuit over the desired land. He worked hard for four years during the resulting legal battle.

Dr. Fagan has produced many academic documents and written several articles on the Trail. For this book, he reviewed all of RSA's Trail-related legal documents and photos. He interviewed the developers that gave the land for the sites on the Trail. He interviewed many of the politicians who were involved in making the official decisions regarding aspects of sites on the Trail. He interviewed people working for RSA, SunBelt Golf, and PCH. He interviewed people that had contracts for working to construct the golf courses and hotels on the Trail.

Dr. Fagan was from the beginning and remains an articulate and influential champion for the Trail. We are fortunate to have his additional contribution in this book to record the history of the Trail's development so that it can be better understood for generations to come.