



Golf, a vital industry in St. Johns County, sees solid economic growth at national level

By Stuart Korfhage
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One of the county's most important industries, golf, has seen its economic impact continue to grow both here and nationally, according to a recent report from a golf advocacy group.

St. Johns County-based organization We Are Golf released its U.S. Golf Economy Report earlier this week at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. It was done in conjunction with National Golf Day, which was Wednesday.

Based on information through 2016, the report showed an increase of 22 percent in spending activity directly driven by golf in the last five years to \$84.1 billion.

We Are Golf CEO Steve Mona said that's a great sign for this county, which receives a large economic boost from the sport.

"Golf, from an overall economic impact point of view, is up over 20 percent over a five-year period of time, (which) is very impressive," Mona said.

That bodes well for a county that relies heavily on the health of the golf industry. St. Johns County is home to one the most important golf tournaments on the PGA Tour in The Players Championship. It's also home to the PGA Tour headquarters itself as well as the World Golf Hall of Fame and The First Tee.

A sign of just how important the sport is to the health of the local economy is the fact that the PGA Tour is the fifth-largest employer in the county. Earlier this year, the Tour announced its plans for a new \$81-million, 187,000-square-foot facility that is scheduled to open in 2020. It plans to add 300 more jobs in the coming years, which will push the total number of employees past 1,000.

Led in part by the golf-centric communities like the World Golf Village and Sawgrass, World Golf Hall of Fame & Museum president Jack Peter said golf is simply part of who we are as a county. It's also part of who we are as a tourist destination.

"Golf is critically important to the identity of St. Johns County," Peter said in an email to The Record. "The economic impact of The Players alone is \$151 million annually. There are 20 golf courses in St. Johns County, and another 48 in our surrounding counties. The great thing about golf tourism is that it spreads tourists across the county."

The U.S. Golf Economy Report showed that U.S. golf generated \$28.5 billion of tourism spending in 2016, up from \$20.6 billion in 2011, driven by greater spending per trip and growth in total trips taken.

As for the region, Florida's First Coast of Golf marketing group said that in 2017 there were more than 90,000 golf tourists who visited Northeast Florida, and they spent more than \$140 million. It said that about 30 percent of all rounds of golf in Northeast Florida are played by visitors.

"It's definitely part of the DNA of our destination," said David Reese, president of Florida's First Coast of Golf. "We're constantly seeing golf bags going through the carousels of our airport (in Jacksonville).

"Golf is vital part of our economic well-being of our community."

With that in mind, there has been some concern in the industry about the decline in total numbers of rounds played in recent years. The drop has been blamed on everything from cultural changes in the American family to the virtual disappearance of golf's biggest star, Tiger Woods, from professional tournaments.

Mona acknowledged that there has been a "moderate" drop in total rounds played, but he said the number of committed golfers — estimated at around 20 million nationally — has remained about the same in the last decade. According to the National Golf Foundation's Golf Participation in the U.S. 2017, overall participation at golf facilities declined slightly over the past five years, from 25.7 million people to 23.8 million.

"What's interesting is the number of golfers who are committed to the game, the ones who say, 'This is part of my lifestyle. I'm going to play until I can't anymore,' has remained very solid and very stable," Mona said.

Even more encouraging for the future, Mona pointed to the increase in the number of junior players during the study period from 2.4 million to 2.9 million. At the same time, Mona said about a third of the junior players are female and a third are non-white. It shows a great potential for growth in a sport that has been dominated by white males for generations.

“Participation among juniors today is what the game will look like 20 or more years from now,” Mona said. “I maintain that the face of golf will change based upon how junior golf participation is changing.

“We want to see golf look how America looks. We’re not there yet, but we’re encouraged by what we see in the junior ranks.”