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February 14, 2018 11:46 AM

Uptown on the up and up

by [JESSE CHAMBERS](#)

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Topgolf features two full-service bars where patrons can have drinks delivered to their bay or sit at the bar and chat with friends. The Uptown destination also has a restaurant that prepares nearly all of its offerings in-house.



Major cities strive to provide fun activities for locals, tourists and convention-goers. This includes everything from Six Flags over Georgia and the World of Coca-Cola in Atlanta to the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville and, of course, Walt Disney World in Orlando.

Birmingham has lagged in this area, but its entertainment reputation may be slowly changing.

The city has recently attracted positive attention for its restaurants, as well as Regions Field, Railroad Park and Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum. And in December, the city welcomed Topgolf, a high-tech driving range with luxury amenities, to the area near the BJCC.

Measuring 65,000 square feet and offering 100-plus hitting bays on three levels, Topgolf is billed as a “golf entertainment complex” and is expected to draw 500,000 visitors annually.

Topgolf’s opening “is a real coup” for the city, according to J. John Oros Jr., president and CEO of the Greater Birmingham Convention & Visitors Bureau.

“It’s a very hot entertainment concept right now all over the country,” Oros said.

As of February, there were 41 locations nationwide, including Huntsville’s recently opened facility, according to the Topgolf website.

The facility is expected to increase visitor traffic in the Uptown entertainment district, help the city attract additional entertainment offerings and boost the city’s ability to attract meetings and conventions — especially given other renovations and additions planned for the nearby BJCC. Those upgrades include a revamped Legacy Arena and a much-debated open-air stadium for UAB football and professional soccer.

Birmingham Mayor Randall Woodfin presented a plan to the City Council in January in which the city would contribute \$3 million per year for 30 years to help pay for the stadium, as well the upgrades to the arena and the convention facilities. The other partners would be the BJCC, UAB and Jefferson County. In February, the council passed a resolution of intent to “make efforts to financially support the construction” of the facility if some details can be worked out.

Topgolf signed a long-term ground lease with the BJCC and had an immediate impact on the local economy, hiring 500 people for full- and part-time jobs, Topgolf spokesperson Morgan Wallace said.

But the facility isn't just for hard-core golfers, according to Topgolf Birmingham Marketing Manager Allison Roberts.

"It's for anyone looking for something different, interactive and fun to do with their peers or family or friends," she said.

Topgolf has a restaurant with its own executive chef, full-service bars and seating for groups at each hitting bay. Guests can play electronic point-scoring games using microchipped balls that score themselves, showing the accuracy and distance of their shots on a TV screen.

Topgolf chose Birmingham because it's "a very strong city," Mark Foster, Topgolf's manager of real estate development, said at City Hall in November 2016 after the Birmingham City Council voted to approve about \$1.5 million in financial incentives for the facility.

"We see a lot of business in downtown Birmingham," Foster said. "The population is growing. The airport was just rated very highly."

And the location "on prime real estate" near the BJCC and the Sheraton and Westin hotels is ideal, according to Roberts.

Topgolf, which BJCC Executive Director Tad Snider calls a "top-tier amenity," should help attract conventions to Birmingham.

"Convention groups are always looking for different types of entertainment options off-campus or off-site," Oros said. "Convention planners want their meeting's attendees to have great after-hours entertainment options. Birmingham has great restaurants and great entertainment districts, but Topgolf offers convention planners another unique option."

Topgolf has increased foot traffic in Uptown, according to Snider. "We anticipated there would be a spillover effect," he said.

"We've helped in drawing people in search of entertainment to the Uptown area, which then exposes them to all that the area has to offer," added Topgolf Birmingham Director Of Operations Tyler McCarthy.

Zebbie Carney, owner of Eugene's Hot Chicken in Uptown, said Topgolf makes "a positive impact on visitors and residents."

"I can't say if Topgolf is bringing us more business, but it's definitely bringing more people to the area," he said.

There are hopes that Topgolf and an expanded BJCC could help revitalize neighborhoods north of Interstate 20/59, such as Norwood, Druid Hills and Fountain Heights.

Mary Jean Baker LaMay, a Norwood resident who ran for the City Council District 4 seat in 2017, said she hasn't heard "one negative comment" about Topgolf from other residents.

“I’ve heard many people talk about how it’s always busy and how that part of the area is now well-lit 24/7, which increases safety,” she said.

“Overall, I believe most residents believe Topgolf will lead to redevelopment of Carraway, and that’s what everyone is waiting for,” LaMay added, referring to the long-vacant Carraway Hospital property located at 1600 Carraway Blvd.

Snider said Topgolf and the Uptown restaurants have begun to create “a proven track record of retail” north of I-20/59, which could attract additional development.

Developer John Boone of Orchestra Partners said the potential for revitalization in the area depends on whether growth occurs in “an intentional and collaborative” manner.

“If development takes place in silos, it’ll probably ignore the adjacent neighborhoods, but if the city can get all the stakeholders to the same table and offer a smooth approval and entitlement roadmap for a group effort ... that would be unique and beneficial to everyone,” Boone said.

“As the primary landowner up there, the city already has a head start on leading this effort, and they’ll be responsible for making sure everyone, even the ‘big bad developers,’ are treated fairly,” he said.

If Topgolf proves to be a long-term success in Birmingham, it could attract other amenities. “I have to think other companies that have entertainment concepts are watching where Topgolf selects their destinations,” Oros said.

Topgolf and Uptown — along with other BJCC improvements — could perhaps attract some entertainment options that may seem a far-fetched currently, according to Snider. These could include “an upscale cinema such as Alamo Drafthouse, Bowlmore Lanes, perhaps a House of Blues-type operation,” he said.

“These types of additions in and around a downtown convention and entertainment zone have occurred in other cities — so why not Birmingham?” Snider said.

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