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Alabama Tourism Department Recognizes Industry Leaders

MONTGOMERY, AL. – The Alabama Tourism Department recognized its 2025 award winners during the 2025 Alabama Governor’s Conference on Tourism, held on location at The Lodge at Gulf State Park by Hilton in Gulf Shores, Alabama.

“We have incredibly strong tourism industry professionals in Alabama, and those recognized this year are no exception,” said Lee Sentell, Director of Alabama Tourism Department. “Their unwavering leadership and dedication continue to elevate Alabama as one of the go-to destinations in America. We are proud to recognize the people and organizations that contribute to the success of tourism in the state.”

Alabama Tourism Hall of Fame – Hans van der Reijden

With over 30 years of international experience, Hans van der Reijden is a visionary leader in hospitality, known for his ability to create exceptional guest experiences and strong employee-driven cultures. A native of Holland, Hans began his career in a 2-Star Michelin restaurant before working in Antwerp, Belgium, and aboard Holland America Line ships. He later joined The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, where he opened hotels worldwide and developed a close mentorship with founder Horst Schulze.

In 2003, Hans joined Schulze at Capella Hotel Group (CHG) as a founding partner, helping build an ultra-luxury hospitality brand focused on personalized service. His work at Capella led him to Auburn, AL, where he oversaw operations at The Hotel at Auburn University and partnered with Auburn’s Hospitality Management Program. After CHG’s sale, Hans launched Ithaka Hospitality Partners (IHP) in 2018, bringing a fresh, experience-first approach to hotel management that moves beyond traditional branding models.

IHP’s first major opening, The Laurel Hotel & Spa, debuted in 2022 and earned Alabama’s only AAA Five Diamond rating in its first year. Located within Auburn University’s Tony & Libba Rane

Culinary Science Center, the project underscores Hans' commitment to education and innovation. With new ventures underway—including the Elevation Convening Center & Hotel in Montgomery in partnership with the Equal Justice Initiative—Hans continues to shape the industry with forward-thinking concepts and a deep passion for mentoring the next generation of hospitality leaders.

Tourism Advocate – Government – Jabo Waggoner

Senator Waggoner, born in Birmingham, Alabama, on January 8, 1937, is serving his 8th term in the Senate after serving from 1966-1983 in the House of Representatives. Senator Waggoner received his BA degree from Birmingham Southern College and his JD degree from Birmingham School of Law. He and his wife, Marilyn, are the parents of four children and grandparents of seven and one great-grandchild. Senator Waggoner is also a member of the Homewood Church of Christ.

He serves on the following boards: Executive Committee of Birmingham Business Alliance; Faulkner University Board of Trustees; Greater Birmingham Convention and Visitors Bureau; Alabama Sports Hall of Fame. He is a member of Hoover, Homewood, Shelby County, Vestavia Hills Chambers of Commerce; a 50-Year member of Civitan International; a member of Masons and Shriners organizations; member of the Monday Morning Quarterback Club. He was inducted into the Birmingham Southern College Sports Hall of Fame in 2007 and received the Birmingham Southern Distinguished Alumni Award in 2013. He was also the recipient of the Ronald Reagan Lifetime Achievement Award in 2012 and the 2013 Alabama State Council of the Arts Council Legacy Award.

Senator Waggoner served as Senate Minority Leader from 2002-2010, and then the Majority leader from 2010 – 2014. Senator Waggoner has the longest record of service of any legislator in the history of Alabama.