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Jesse Owens Memorial Park directors seek grant for track

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OAKVILLE — Twelve years after a consultant created a construction plan for Jesse Owens Memorial Park, it lacks one project before James Pinion says it's finished.

Pinion, the park treasurer, said directors have applied for a \$250,000 grant from U.S. Rep. Bud Cramer's office to build a 400-meter track commemorating the achievements of the late Olympic champion.

"That was (Owens') trademark," Pinion said. "You would

A tribute to an Olympic legend

To learn more about Jesse Owens, visit the museum's Web site at www.jesseowensmuseum.org.

n't have a park dedicated to Babe Ruth without a baseball field."

Pinion and Oakville resident Thurman White raised more than \$2 million to develop the park beginning in 1991. White had procured land across the road from three markers honoring the late Olympic champion. Pinion, his wife, Nancy, and Curtis and Joyce Cole are park directors.

Pinion said he has talked with representatives of colleges and high schools across the country who said they would participate in track meets at the park because of Owens' legacy.

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Emmanuel Smith, left, and Jeremiah Hall at the Olympic statue at Jesse Owens Park. Only one project has not been completed from the park's original plans.



Austin Burch and Houston South at a mural in the Jesse Owens Museum in Oakville. The boys were on a tour with their class from Decatur Heritage Christian Academy.

Owens

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He said the track is the only missing part of the original construction plan that Auburn University tourism specialist Tom Chestnut designed. He believes it would allow the park to be self-sufficient.

The park is part of a tax-exempt foundation and relies on donations, admission from tours and the County Commission for funding, Pinion said.

A storage building and concession stand next to the ball fields are the most recent additions, he said.

Attracting tourists

A billboard on Interstate 65 in Cullman advertising the park is probably directing more



Pinion

tourists to Oakville, said Lee Sentell, director of the Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Media.

The bureau gave Lawrence County a grant to pay for the billboard at the request of Rep. Jody Letson, D-Courtland, Sentell said.

This is the Year of Sports, a promotion by the bureau recognizing sports in Alabama. The bureau promoted the annual 10K Jesse Owens Memorial Run in Moulton as one of the top 10 events in the state this year.

"This year being the Year of Sports, we thought it was a good time to support their activities, and we think it's helped generate traffic to their museum," he said.

Sentell said when Sports Illustrated compiled a list of the top 100 sports figures in American history, Owens was in the top five.

He said Owens was a role model for children.

"One of my favorite quotes from him was 'An athlete should stand 10 feet tall. You never know how many youngsters are watching,'" Sentell said. "That certainly is good advice that I



Credentials issued to Ruth and Jesse Owens for the XXI Olympic Games in 1976 are on display at the Jesse Owens Museum.

Daily photo by Gary Cosby Jr.

wish more of today's athletes would follow."

Pinion said the park and museum draw hundreds of visitors each month, and more than 1,000 a month during the summer from around the world.

"It's interesting to look at the sign-in sheet and see where people come from," he said.

An 'amazing story'

Teresa Hall, a teacher at Decatur Heritage Christian Academy, toured the park with a group of students this month.

"His story is amazing," she said. "He came from almost nothing and won gold medals. In this society, you don't have stories like that. It's more the movie-star type stuff."

The students tested their athletic skills in a broad jump pit in front of the museum that commemorates Owens' 1936 Berlin Olympic gold medal jump of 26 feet, 5 5/16 inches.

They toured the museum, where glass display cases contain memorabilia, including programs from the 1936 Olympics, replicas of track uniforms and shoes, medals and trophies from Owens' high school years. Visitors can hear Owens narrate the 1936 Olympics in a mini theater that shows the movie "Return to Berlin."

Adjacent to the museum, a wooden house with cracked

walls and blankets on the floor for beds is a replica of the house Owens lived in until he moved with his family to Cleveland when he was 9 years old.

Visitors can press a button to hear a recording by Owens' brother, Sylvester, who died on Father's Day 2005.

Describing family life

The recording describes the life the Owens had as a sharecropper family in Oakville.

Pinion said some tourists have different reactions after seeing how the family lived. Some are disturbed by the family's living conditions, while others say, "I grew up in a house just like this one."

Fundraising was slow in the early 1990s, but increased significantly after Pinion persuaded the Olympic Torch Committee to reroute the Olympic torch through Oakville during the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. During a dedication ceremony June 29, 1996, Owens' widow, Ruth, lit the flame of a stainless steel replica of the 1936 Olympic torch with the 1996 Olympic torch. In October 2005, Hampton Inn's Save-A-Landmark program furnished volunteers and \$38,000 to paint, clean and landscape the park.

Chamber of Commerce President Elaine Peyton said the addition of a track would improve Lawrence County's economy by

increasing tourism through track and field meets.

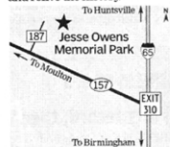
A track would also give local students a place to compete and could bring more opportunities for college track and field scholarships, while serving as a monument to Owens' accomplishments, she said.

"Just to have an athlete that completely contradicted a historical figure who was trying to wipe out anything but blond-haired, blue-eyed Germans, his

win in the Olympics became so much more powerful than any other wins in the history of the Olympics, and him being from here is huge," she said.

County Commission Chairman Harold LouAllen said the park has been a valuable asset to the county and state.

"It's a historical site honoring the life of a man with great dedication and determination, which led to his becoming a great Olympian at a time when his race wasn't given today's opportunities," he said. "I encourage anyone who hasn't visited the Jesse Owens Park to come and relive the history."



Daily map by Laura Taylor