

Panel claims space reason for banning Owens statue

MOULTON (AP) — Three Lawrence County commissioners deny that race had any bearing on their decision to ban a monument honoring Olympic track star Jesse Owens from the courthouse lawn.

During a special meeting, three county commissioners voted Tuesday to block state Rep. Roger Dutton's proposal to put the monument on the courthouse lawn. One commissioner abstained.

The commissioners claimed the lawn already was crowded with too many monuments.

"This is not a black and white issue, but that's what it looks like and that is why it so sad," said Dutton, who was not present when the vote was taken.

Owens, the son of a black Lawrence County sharecropper, became a national hero when he won four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin amid Nazi claims that blacks were genetically inferior.

In July, Gov. George C. Wallace appropriated \$2,300 from a discretionary fund for the Owens monument. Dutton said the courthouse lawn, located in the county seat of Moulton, would be the most visible location.

But several commissioners weren't sure the square was the appropriate spot, and action on the measure was repeatedly delayed. That prompted some northwest Alabama residents to accuse the panel of racial prejudice.

"If it was a Paul 'Bear' Bryant monument would you hear these excuses?" asked Marvin Fitzgerald, Owens' first cousin. Bryant is the late University of Alabama football coach who holds the record for the most coaching victories in college football.

But the three commissioners who voted against the proposal — Wayne Sutton, Oakley Lanier and Raymond Beck — denied Tuesday that race was an issue.

Sutton and Lanier said there are already too many monuments on the square, which is 295 feet by 296 feet and includes the courthouse, the lawn and a parking area. There are memorials honoring veterans of World War II and Vietnam on the lawn.

Beck said he is opposed to honoring individuals.

"We have veterans of wars and they should be recognized," Beck said. "There is not any prejudice against blacks. I'll work with them and I'll do as much now as I ever have."