

Jesse Owens Park plans depend on timing

By Steve Oden
of the Advertiser staff

Reading the Jesse Owens Park and Museum at Oakville for the 1996 Summer Olympics is the challenge facing a group of Lawrence County officials and volunteers.

Although there won't be a single Olympic athletic event held at the facility, the possibility exists for economic benefits and national media attention by networking with the Olympiad in Atlanta, Ga.

Atlanta is the first U.S. city to host the games since they were held in Los Angeles, Cal., in 1984.

Jesse Owens, the hero of the 1936 Olympics in Germany, was born in a sharecropper's cabin in Oakville.

At present, the Jesse Owens Memorial Park is an open field. Site preparation work was done recently by the Lawrence County Commission, Brown & Root, and Champion International.

Development ideas have come from an Auburn University study coordinated by Dr. Tom Chesnutt. A Birmingham architect, Kenneth Owens, has agreed to lend his help with the project.

What is needed are funds to take the project forward and complete it by 1996, according to members of the Jesse Owens Memorial Park Board.

The board met Monday evening to report progress, develop plans and schedules, and discuss fund raising, grant applications, and public awareness.

Samantha Letson Smith represented her father, state Rep. Sam Letson, at the meeting.

Letson had been called to Montgomery for a special session of the Legislature.

She reported that Rep. Letson had received assurances from 4th District U.S. Rep. Tom Bevill that he supports the development of the park and intends to make a site inspection soon.

A meeting was held last week at the park, she said. Nora Landers, a NARCOG representative, Rep. Letson, Sen. Ray Campbell, and members of the Jesse Owens Park Committee were in attendance.

Mrs. Smith said her father also met with Gene Anderson of the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs about the park project.

James Pinion, county agent-coordinator, said the board agreed that immediate plans for development of the park should include construction of a museum and the commissioning of a statue of the late Jesse Owens.

The board's finance committee will be responsible for raising money for the statue.

County Agent Henry Buchanan said contact with Owens' widow has cleared the way for the board to raise money in the name of Jesse Owens.

County Commissioner Larry LouAllen, in whose district the park is located, said the Lawrence governing board budgeted \$10,000 last year for development of the project, and he expects another \$10,000 to be earmarked. In addition, he said there is a good possibility of obtaining a \$50,000 grant to use for park development.

LouAllen became the first person to contribute to the Jesse Owens statue fund when he pledged \$100.

Pinion said on Tuesday he contacted the Alabama Arts Council about possible sculptors who might be interested in the statue commission.

"They are sending us a list. They also said it might be possible to apply for a grant to help with the statue," he told The Advertiser.

"This whole project is something we need to move fast on... We can't afford to drag our feet," he added.