

# Backers of Jesse Owens Park



LeRoy Walker

By Jon Rabihoff  
News staff writer

The effort to develop a park and museum in Oakville dedicated to Jesse Owens got out of the starting blocks Thursday, but it is clear the project is still a long way from the finish line.

Close to \$200,000 has been raised or pledged for the project, but estimates of its ultimate cost range from \$1 million to \$5 million.

Organizers of the effort hope to have the park developed and a museum built in time for a visit by the Olympic torch when it is carried cross-country on its way to the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta.

"Right now, it's a project with a vision looking for leadership in the community to make it happen," said Paula Hovater, a spokeswoman for the effort.

Toward that end, about 75 Birmingham-area business leaders attended a luncheon Thursday at The Club, at which a model of the development plan was unveiled and those attending were urged to take an active role in moving the project forward.

Ms. Hovater, in an emotional plea to the group, said residents of Oakville — a rural hamlet in northwest Alabama where Owens was born — do not have the money to build the project on their own.

"These folks want to give a great tribute to Jesse Owens and you can help them," she said.

Owens, who died in 1980, became an international hero when he won four gold medals at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, making a mockery of Adolf Hitler's talk of a master race.

Promoters of the project are looking for

"seed money" to do a feasibility study, Ms. Hovater said, and plan to formally kick off fundraising efforts early next year.

At present, visitors to Jesse Owens Memorial Park off Alabama 157 find two monuments and a display case containing stories and photographs from Owens' career.

Across the road is a 17-acre tract where park promoters hope to build a museum, a replica of Owens' childhood home and a 10-foot statue of the Olympic hero.

In addition, plans call for development of a track, baseball field, tennis courts and picnic pavilions. Almost \$100,000 in site work has already been done as a donation to the project.

U.S. Olympic Committee President LeRoy Walker — a friend of Owens in attendance Thursday — said there is an "excellent" chance the Olympic torch will stop in Oakville, but no final decisions have been made.

While Owens' accomplishments are commemorated in halls of fame, Walker said, "There is no tangible thing that I know Jesse would want" that utilizes the events in his life to teach and inspire young people.

Walker said the cost of the project, which he put at \$3 million to \$5 million, is a small price to pay considering the benefits it will bring to Alabama and the fact that it will honor one of the state's greatest athletes.

"This is a project that needs all the help it can get," he said.

U.S. Rep. Tom Bevill, D-Jasper, said of the proposed development, "We know that it's going to be a tourist attraction to bring people into Lawrence County."

Gov. Jim Folsom, in commenting on the possibility of an Olympic torch visit, said, "We would be greatly honored if we would be able to take part in this tribute."