

Museum funding won't pay utility bills

By Brette Martin Burnes
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"Hitler would be very proud of the decision made here this afternoon."

With these words, James Pinion told the Lawrence County Commission exactly how he felt about a \$4,000 appropriation for fiscal year 2000-01 for the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum in Oakville.

Born the son of an Oakville sharecropper, Owens won four gold medals during the 1936 Olympics in Berlin and put to rest German ruler Adolf Hitler's claims of Aryan supremacy.

Pinion, who serves as treasurer for the Owens Park board, said the Nazi ruler would be pleased with the commission's decision because in effect, \$4,000 won't fund the facility for even six months.

Pinion told the commissioners at a Friday-afternoon continued meeting that the appropriation will be enough to keep the museum's doors open until the end of February. At that time, he said, the board

will be forced to close the museum unless other funds become available.

In addition to Owens Park, the county also owns Veterans' Memorial Park in Caddo, Red Bank Park and Oakville Indian Mounds Park and Museum. In adopting the 2000-01 budget Friday, commissioners agreed to give \$4,000 to each of the four county-owned parks, plus place an additional \$10,000 in the parks and recreation fund to be divided among other parks throughout Lawrence County.

Prior to adopting the budget, Commissioner Randall LouAllen made a motion to appropriate \$8,000 to each county-owned park. Commissioner Mose Jones, who at a work session earlier in the week proposed that the county give each of its parks \$9,000 to \$10,000, supported LouAllen's motion. Commissioner Barkley Lentz abstained from voting, while Commissioner Hutson Parker and Chairman Bradley Cross voted against the LouAllen's motion.

um, do you think they care about district lines?" LouAllen asked.

When Parker reiterated his belief that every park should receive the same amount, Jones stated, "I disagree that other parks should get as much.

"People understand the difference between a county park and a city park," Jones continued. "I can assure you that Moulton is not going to take care of Red Bank Park. We're not obligated to fund parks that aren't (county-owned), but we do give them something when we can."

Cross agreed with Parker's suggestion of giving each district the same amount, but County Administrator Joan Lang informed them they can't specify district lines in an appropriation.

Jones said he had no problem with setting aside a fund to distribute money to other parks, but he maintained that the county parks should receive additional funds.

"It is the obligation of this county to fund the county parks," Jones stated. "If we're

At a work session held September 20, Parker suggested putting \$25,000 into the parks and recreation fund, giving \$5,000 to each district so that each commissioner can distribute the money accordingly.

Parker and Cross, who represent Districts 2 and 3, respectively, do not have a county-owned park in their districts. Parker said any money going to their districts can be dispersed to municipal and school parks.

"We need to help the kids in the districts that don't have a county park," Parker said. "We need to make sure they have facilities to play on just like the others."

"I stand ready to do that," LouAllen replied, adding that if Cross and Parker want to establish a county park in their areas, he would support them fully. "If we need more county parks, then we ought to build them."

LouAllen pointed out that kids from every district at some point play ball at parks in neighboring districts.

"When kids get on a school bus down in Town Creek to go play ball or go to a muse-

going to get our county parks up to speed, we're going to have to put money in them.

"We should take care of our own," Jones continued. "These are county parks, and it's our obligation to fund them just like we fund the county jail."

Jones said the appropriation could be taken from the county's solid waste fund, the account where the county's regional landfill's tipping fees are deposited. For every ton of garbage deposited at the site, the county receives \$1. Lang said the totals usually average about \$20,000 per month, or \$240,000 per year.

"We definitely have enough money to fund our parks," Jones said. "The dump trucks are going to roll, and every time they roll, we're going to get some money."

"I personally think the (solid waste money) should be spent on roads," Parker stated, pointing out that overloaded garbage trucks travel every road in the county, causing extensive damage."

Budget

"Don't shut down the county parks and put all the money in the highway department," Jones said. "The highway department is not the only entity in the county budget."

Eventually, Cross suggested that each county park receive \$4,000, and that another \$10,000 be set aside for other parks. At Friday's meeting, the commissioners approved the appropriation when they adopted the budget for the upcoming fiscal year.

Owens park board member Therman White, one of the individuals instrumental in the park's development, pointed out to the commission that with the exception of the Indian Mounds park, Owens Park is the only one of the facilities that fully operates year round.

"Will you explain to me how you can justify each park getting \$4,000?" White asked the commissioners. "We have a museum. Other parks have softball fields and operate about four months a year. We're open eight more months."

White also asked the commissioners why they wouldn't appro-

appropriate more when there's more than \$1 million in the solid waste account.

Cross said the money is earmarked for other debts.

"It's not good business to mess with money that's owed," Cross said.

After a lengthy discussion, Cross suggested that the county try to get financial assistance from the state for funding Owens park.

"If this is your final decision, we have no choice but to do that," Pinion told them. "But, when those gates are closed, I just don't want to be around when all the press comes."

Recalling the controversy that developed years ago when commissioners voted against putting an Owens monument on the courthouse square, Jones agreed with Pinion, saying, "I don't want Lawrence County to have that embarrassment."

"I agree with Mr. Cross that we need to search for other funds," Commissioner Lentz stated. "We're not going to let Jesse Owens Park close. We're not going to let any parks close.

"At least we made a first step this year," Lentz continued, pointing out that, with the exception of temporarily paying utilities at county parks last year, the county hadn't been giving anything. "I think we're really on the right road if we all work together."