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Jesse Owens museum

Lawrence wants Alabama to take control of facility

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MOULTON — The state tourism and travel director said budget cuts are forcing the state to relinquish control of smaller museums to local governments, making it unlikely that the Jesse Owens Museum will become a state-operated facility.

Lawrence County owns and operates the museum, something Lee Sentell said is not unusual.

"There are a number of local governments which own and operate museums in the state, because these museums express the uniqueness of their areas," said Sentell, who also is a state Historical Commission board member.

District 5 County Commissioner Barkley Lentz wants to turn the Jesse Owens facility over to the state because tourism directors can do a better job of promoting the facility



DAILY File
Photo by Emily
Saunders

This statue is part of the Jesse Owens Museum, District 5 County Commissioner Barkley Lentz wants to turn the Jesse Owens facility over to the state because tourism directors can do a better job of promoting the facility than a local park board could.

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Lentz and District 3 Commissioner Bradley Cross said

because there is an election next year, the county might get a commitment from gubernato-

rial candidates to assume the park.

The site is at Jesse Owens'

birthplace of Oakville, and has been a source of contention since its creation in the mid-1990s. Then-board members persuaded the U.S. Olympic Committee to reroute the 1996 Olympic Torch through Oakville.

Since then some commissioners, including Lentz, balked at having to pay the museum's utility bills, and said the board is ineffective in making the facility self-sufficient.

Lentz' suggestion came less than three months after the commission restructured the board, and the county is making improvements to the park with funds from a federal grant. Park supporters expect the addition of two lighted ballfields to generate revenue when Speake-area recreation leagues begin using it.

The Jesse Owens Park is in Chairman Randall LouAllen's commission District 5.

If the state assumed the museum, LouAllen said, he would want the ballfields to remain under county control, like those at the county's recreational facilities at Red Bank and Caddo.

Lentz' suggestion is not the first time a commissioner wanted to give the Jesse Owens facility to the state. There is an interactive museum, a statue and a replica of the dogtrot cabin in which Owens was born. But the Historical Commission said there is no historical significance, such as the cabin being Owens' birthplace or the park being on his birth site.

Despite that, Sentell said, the museum is impressive.

"The Jesse Owens Museum is a valuable showcase for one of the world's best-known athletes," he said.

Sentell's favorite part of the museum is a sign quoting Owens' view of the way a contemporary athlete should behave.

The sign says an athlete should always be well-behaved because he never knows how many children are watching him.

"Mr. Owens' message is quite relevant today when we have a lot of professional athletes whose personal behavior is far from exemplary," Sentell said.