

Park hopes to build track



Matt McKean/TimesDaily

This statue of Olympic hero Jesse Owens stands in front of the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum in Oakville. Park treasurer James Pinion is seeking a federal grant to build an Olympic-size track at the park.

Owens Park track would also be used for soccer

By Dante Mozie
Staff Writer

As the park treasurer of the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum, James Pinion is surrounded by baseball and softball fields, a replica of the 1936 Summer Olympics torch and a world-class museum honoring Owens, among other amenities.

But to complete his dream that is 15 years in the making, Pinion wants to add a track to the park's collection of attractions.

Pinion is seeking a \$250,000 federal grant from U.S. Rep. Bud Cramer to build an eight-lane, 400-meter Olympic-size track at the Oakville park. He added he wanted to have bleachers with a capacity for 2,000 spectators.

Pinion said Precision Sport Surfaces, a Charlottesville, Va., company that will analyze the site for the park if the grant money is received, estimated the total cost of the project will come to about \$250,000. That includes, among other things,

the installation of drainage pipes, landscaping and the track surface, which cost \$90,000 alone, Pinion said.

He added that the track may be big enough to contain a soccer field.

"That would make it versatile for events," Pinion said. "It would be a two-fold plan, in that, when we're not using it for track, we can use it for soccer."

Park officials are counting on Cramer's grant to finish the park. According to a statement from Cramer's office, the Democratic Alabama senator, who's not seeking re-election, said he's "pleased that Oakville is home to the Jesse Owens Memorial Park which honors the life and legacy of one of north Alabama's most prominent individuals."

"(Cramer) helped us in this region before, and I hope it will be one of the last things he does before he leaves office," Pinion said. "I hope

we strike lucky and get it."

If plans to get the grant money run short, Pinion has a backup. He said he plans to sell a film given to him by an individual from Austin, Texas. The 30-minute film shows events from the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, including Owens in competition, German dictator Adolf Hitler walking into the stadium and the Hindenburg flying over the action.

Pinion said he hasn't yet figured out the value of the film.

"It might be worth a penny or it might be worth a million," Pinion said.

Pinion said he's received interest from high schools in Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia to participate in track meets and tournaments at the proposed track, as well as tournaments for junior colleges. He's also considered resuming the ARCO/Jesse Owens Games, a track and field event for young athletes formerly held in Arizona.

Pinion hopes to add extra events to the track meet.

"It would be really interesting to see if anyone could win in all four of the events (Owens) won gold medals in," Pinion said.

Owens won gold medals in the 100-meter, 200-meter, 400-meter team relay and the long jump during competition in the 1936 Summer Olympics.

The competition and the track would add to the numerous attractions the park offers. From a long pit that visitors can jump to match Owens' gold medal jump of 26 feet 5 5/16 inches, to a replica of his childhood home, the park and the museum serves as a tribute to the legendary athlete who broke barriers in the face of

hatred and Nazism, all while facing racism in his own country.

Pinion said the park draws visitors from around the country and around the world. He said recent visitors have come from countries such as Germany, Russia and Czechoslovakia.

"Sometimes I wonder how they got here," Pinion said.

Pinion said that the track would be the fulfillment of the plan he had in mind when he and Oakville resident Thurman White began the plan and raise money for the park in 1991.

"That's all I've been thinking about since we got started," Pinion said. "To me, personally, the park wouldn't be finished until the track is built and ... it would be like icing on the cake."