

The Tuskegee News

Airmen Site welcomes Construction Phase II

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Behind the scenes are hundreds working on the October 2008 grand opening of the new Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site at Moton Field, but it isn't hard to see the progress.

Last week, Site Manager Deanna Mitchell completed the final walk through for the first phase of construction. Phase II is already underway. Contractors began raising the skeleton for the new Hangar No. 2 only days ago and the form is shaping up quickly.

The outer rooms of hangar one have been completely rebuilt. Where weeds and brush grew tall in ceiling-less, crumbling rooms, attractive environments now abound.

Hangar No. 2 will house an IMAX theater and more exhibits to compliment the full load of learning tools in Hangar No.1. Also, a P-51 Mustang – the World War II fighter airplane the Red Tails famously flew – will be suspended from the ceiling.

When the site is completed visitors will be able to enter three of the buildings, but park officials only expect Hangar No. 1 to be completed at the time of the grand opening October 10-12. Mitchell said the Skyway Club and Hangar No. 2 would be ready to entertain guests shortly after.

The Friends of the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic site are actively working to prepare for the grand opening. The group's primary function is to raise money for the site, but volunteers with the organization are divided into 13 groups charged with preparing for the grand opening.

Most are readying work plans now in wait for the National Park Service Incident Command Team (ICT) to come to Tuskegee at the end of this month. The ICT, according to Park Superintendent Catherine Light, is vastly experienced at handling a grand opening of this size and should easily further the Friends' efforts thus far.

In Tuskegee, Utilities Board (UBT) General Manager Mark Ennis is being praised by those working overtime to prepare for the grand opening.

“He's really pulled through in a big way,” Mitchell said.

Ennis proposed Wednesday night (April 9) at UBT's regular meeting the board approve a \$450,000 appropriation to install the site's desperately needed water line. For more than a year Mitchell and other Park Service staff have been seeking funding for the line, which is required to provide fire protection services in the future and help the hangars pass safety inspections.

Without the line, there would be no grand opening in October. Regulations would prevent the public from setting foot on the site.

The Tuskegee News was already off the press by the time of the UBT meeting Wednesday, but Ennis said the board was eager to do its part to help ready the site and he saw no obstacles preventing the appropriation from being approved.

The city has applied for the same grant twice to fund the water line, but was denied last year and hasn't released that the grant was received as of yet. UBT wanted to use the water line anyway to serve the Marable Subdivision on Chappie James Drive and decided there was no reason to wait.

"Time's getting short," he said. "We wanted to go ahead and nip this thing in the bud."

Another development that's been waiting on the sidelines is the Federal funding for the grand opening. Light told The Tuskegee News last Friday (April 5) that the \$255,000 appropriation has been received and is ready for allocation, though the money will probably be controlled by the ICT.

Mitchell and Site Ranger Christine Biggars applied for the money in 2005, right after Mitchell began serving at the Airmen site. Both women hoped to have the money by now in order to hire an event planner for the grand opening, but its progress down the government ladder has been slow at best.

In all, the site looks amazing and the progress is undeniable. What was once a desolate shell is shaping into a home for history – where the Airmen's legacy can be beautifully protected.

To learn more about the Tuskegee Airmen or the work at the new Historic Site, or to inquire about volunteering, contact the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site at (334) 724-0922.