

August 28, 2008
COMMUNITY

Airmen Site Grand Opening gets green light

By Jeff Thompson
for The Tuskegee News

TUSKEGEE, Alabama (STPNS) -- For the most part, a grueling two weeks for some flew under the radar for everyone else. The good news is, after a meeting in Tuskegee, the Grand Opening of the new Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site (NHS) is back on.

And this is the point where most reply, "Was it ever off?"

The answer is both "yes," privately, and "no," for the public.

Almost three weeks ago, specifically August 8, the National Park Service (NPS) Regional Office in Atlanta was made aware of what Regional Director Davis Vela called "contract deliverables" that wouldn't be ready by the scheduled Grand Opening on October 10. According to Vela, those "deliverables," which are essentially issues with construction at the site, were hazards that may prevent the site from being safe for a large event.

So the Regional Office decided, without full input from its legislative partners – Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. and Tuskegee University – that an event would take place in Tuskegee during the originally-scheduled Grand Opening dates of October 10-12, 2008, and the actual Grand Opening would be pushed back to Spring 2009 after all phases of the site's construction were finished.

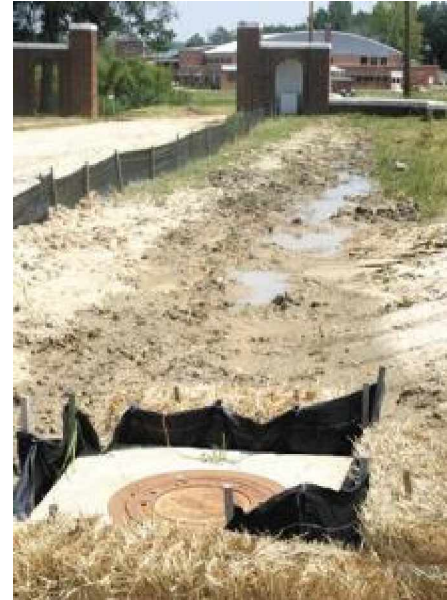
Then, as more than 300 Tuskegee Airmen booked flights and made hotel reservations to attend the historic Grand Opening ceremony, the NPS Regional Office made no announcement of the decision. Regular meetings of local volunteers involved in planning for the Grand Opening halted for two weeks and rumors spread like seeds in the wind.

But at that point, the rumors were true.

Monday, August 18

On Monday, The Tuskegee News contacted **Bill Reynolds**, a spokesman for the Regional Office, who confirmed the fears of many in the community.

"We've encountered problems with the site itself," Reynolds said. "These unforeseen, unanticipated



Unforeseen drainage issues at the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site caused the National Park Service Regional Office to pull the plug on the Grand Opening scheduled for October 10-12, 2008. But a meeting last Friday (August 22) at Tuskegee University saw that decision reversed.

Staff Photo

challenges caused us to reevaluate when we could open to the public.”

Reynolds went on to say there would be a “very scaled-down” event on October 10, but the National Historic Site would not be open to the public.

Reynolds said these unforeseen problems included drainage issues at the site. Then he added, “We’ve always known they were there, but now it’s apparent they are worse than anticipated.”

He also said, “It would be unnecessarily costly for us to halt the project for a couple of days.”

Reynolds then referred The Tuskegee News to **Catherine Light**, Superintendent of the Tuskegee Airmen NHS, Tuskegee Institute NHS and the Selma to Montgomery Historic Trail.

“The Park Service is trying to deal with responding to the public and stakeholders,” Light said. “We’ve always known there was a problem on-site according to project managers. Natural springs continue to pop up.”

“The site will not be open to the public according to the Regional Director right now,” Light continued. “And every time it’s a health or safety issue it’s tough to get that decision altered.”

Light also confirmed there would be some type of event, but insinuated entities other than the Park Service would need to fund it.

“Legally, I don’t know if we (NPS) can pay if it’s not the grand opening,” she said.

That brings up an interesting point, because in 20 minutes of a recorded interview with **Regional Director Vela**, neither he nor Reynolds ever used “grand opening” to describe what would be taking place October 10 – only the word “event.”

Light then directed The Tuskegee News to another employee of the Regional Office, **Paul Hatchett**, who Light said could better explain the problems with the site. The Tuskegee News left at least two messages on Hatchett’s voice mail and never received a return phone call.

Locally, planning for the Grand Opening had all but stopped – since the order had come down from Regional that plans had changed. But those dedicated to the cause didn’t bat an eye.

“You can’t have exhibits set up in Hangar No. 1 for eight months and not let people see them. That’s nonsense,” said **Christine Biggars**, Site Ranger at the Airmen NHS, on Monday, August 18. “There’s some political pressure being exerted. Let’s see what the end of the week holds.”

Biggars, first of all, referenced the exhibits for the site, which are on schedule with the original plan. They’re being produced in Tennessee and will be ready for installation in September. Pushing the Grand Opening back to Spring 2009 would mean a waste of the setup for more than half a year.

Second, Biggars was talking about a the meeting held last Friday, August 22, at the **Tuskegee University Kellogg Conference Center**, where legislative partners Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. **President Gen. Russell Davis** and TU President Benjamin Payton were scheduled to meet with Park Service Regional Director David Vela.

Midweek, August 19-21

Tuesday, August 19, Reynolds called The Tuskegee News and requested the paper hold the

information about postponing the Grand Opening until its August 28 issue. He didn't amend or retract the official statement from the Regional Office, though. He just wanted the "final" decision of the director, which had already been kept secret for two weeks, held until after Friday's meeting – meaning another nine days would pass before the public, Airmen included, could come out of the dark.

The idea of "political pressure" coming down to reverse the decision may or may not have included U.S. Congressman Mike Rogers, who was scheduled for a courtesy visit to Tuskegee Wednesday (August 20). Rogers wasn't aware of the change in plans before he arrived in town, but after a meeting with President Payton Wednesday afternoon he was ready to take up arms with the rest of the community to hold the Grand Opening as scheduled.

"If it isn't reversed," Rogers said Wednesday, "I'll be one of the loudest voices, alongside this community, speaking out against the administration that made this decision."

Thursday morning, August 21, the day before the big meeting, Rogers' office called The Tuskegee News office and left a message that said, "The Grand Opening will not be delayed." Rogers' office was contacted in response, but the message was never returned.

Friday, August 22

The meeting was scheduled for 2:30 p.m. in the Teleconference Room at the Kellogg Conference Center. Joining General Davis, President Payton and Regional Director Vela in the room was a host of prominent faces from the community and Park Service.

Superintendent Light and Reynolds were there, as were Tuskegee Mayor Johnny Ford and City Manager Al Davis. Rogers sent his field representative Alvin Lewis. Palmer Sullins, President of the Black Pilots of America and Tuskegee Chamber of Commerce President Charlie Thompson were also attending. In all, the meeting had about 15 to 20 people around the table.

The Tuskegee News was not allowed inside, but according to sources, Vela and the Park Service staff members truly believed when they went into the meeting that the decision to postpone would not be changed. After almost three hours in the room, though, the news reported was otherwise.

"Within past 72 hours and especially last night, the team provided me with an update and shared with me that all of those issues that had been conveyed previously were being addressed," Vela said. "And not only addressed, but there were actually some deliverables that were being moved forward. And I was very pleased to hear that and share that with the partners today."

When Vela was asked to specify the problems that led to the decision to postpone, he named the lack of proper water pressure for fire suppression at the site, even after seeing how much progress had been made installing the new water line. The water line, which is costing the Utilities Board of Tuskegee approximately \$300,000, is scheduled to be in place by September 12.

Vela also talked – but far from specifically – about the Artesian wells on site and how they played in to his decision to postpone the grand opening.

"We found recently that there were some challenges due to the existing artesian wells and water runoff and the impact to road and building structures, and there was a variety of related construction issues that came to light. Some planned some unplanned," Vela said after the meeting. "So what we wanted to do was make sure that we kept on target in meeting those construction deliverables and stayed on budget. But the other thing that was important was that we had a site that was safe and had the infrastructure in order to have a successful and productive event."

As mentioned before, neither Vela or Reynolds used the words "grand opening" when speaking of the event on October 10, 2008, but Payton and General Davis had no problem with the phrase after the meeting.

"The point of the meeting today was to get an understanding of the status of the long-planned Grand Opening on October 10 and to work through and talk through any issues and problems we had and challenges and to make certain we all were together in terms of how we are going to proceed," Payton said.

"From my point of view, it was an excellent meeting. I appreciate very much David Vela taking the time to come and spend with us and to receive and hear our concerns and to struggle through with us to reach the kind of conclusion we all not only can live with, but think is the right decision. And that is the decision to move forward and have this Grand Opening of the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site on October 10 as planned.

So, until further notice, the Tuskegee Airmen will have their Grand Opening. But, based on the actions taken by the National Park Service over the past few weeks, if anything changes between now and then the public may not be the first to know.