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MILITARY NEWS

Association raising funds for Fort Jackson Centennial Park

By JEFF WILKINSON
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Read more here: <http://www.thestate.com/news/local/military/article31366727.html#storylink=cpy>

A group of retired military leaders and interested civilians are raising funds to build a park at Fort Jackson to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the nation's largest training base in 2017.

The Gateway to the Army Association is seeking to raise \$1.5 million for the park, which will feature a statue of male and female drill sergeants and an amphitheater as its centerpiece. The

fund-raising drive will kick off with a news conference Tuesday at the First Responders Memorial in front of the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center.

The park would be designed to enhance family gatherings during the fort's weekly graduation of new soldiers. It is also intended to host military events and ceremonies, as well as serving as a place where soldiers and civilians can unwind and reflect.

"The fort has held up its end of the bargain by turning out first-class soldiers," said retired Maj. Gen. Abe Turner, a native South Carolinian who served as the fort's commander from 2004-06. "It's time for us to show our appreciation and say 'Happy birthday, Fort Jackson.'"

Turner is a member of the board of the Gateway to the Army Association. Other board members include NBA Hall of Famer and former USC star Alex English, Richland County Sheriff Leon Lott, retired Sgt. Maj. of the Army Jack Tilley, retired four-star Gen. Fred Woerner and television personality Joe Pinner.

The park is the brainchild of retired Command Sgt. Maj. Marty Wells, a former command sergeant major of West Point who was stationed at Fort Jackson three times and now serves as an Army ambassador for the 81st Regional Support Command, an Army reserve component headquartered at Fort Jackson.

Wells said while other posts like Fort Benning, Ga., and Fort Bragg, N.C., have statues and memorials dedicated to the work done there, Fort Jackson has very little to commemorate its unique role. The fort, established in 1917 during World War I, trains about 70,000 soldiers and sailors each year, including about 42,000 new soldiers in basic combat training, more than half of all new soldiers who receive basic training in the Army.

"There is nothing at Fort Jackson that lends itself to what Fort Jackson does," said Wells, who noted that about 1 million soldiers have trained there through the years. "When I think of Fort Jackson, I think of drill sergeants. So I thought of a statue of a drill sergeant."

But when Wells met with Fort Jackson brass, he learned of plans to raze the old post headquarters on Jackson Boulevard and create green space where families could gather on family days and after graduations. The area is across the street from the Fort Jackson Museum, where many families gather, as much for the air conditioning as for the high quality displays.

"So what started out as a statue ended up being a centennial park," Wells said.

The Greek-revival-style park, designed by Columbia master carver and memorial designer Ron Clamp, will feature a living green space with winding trails leading through separate areas of

honor and remembrance. Visitors will be able to meander through the park, stopping at various points to learn about the history of Fort Jackson and the Army.

“For many of these families, Fort Jackson is their one and only impression of what South Carolina is,” Clamp said. “It’s one of the most-visited sites in the state. We want to make it feel like you’re in a special place, something bigger than yourself.”

Clamp said the expected \$1.5-million cost is “very low” for a park of this scale; but he expects a lot of in-kind donations. “We’re going to eliminate the middlemen,” he said.

The elements in the park are intended to promote education of and inspire enthusiasm for Fort Jackson and the Army. Using GPS technology and the Internet, visitors will be able to view informational web pages and watch inspiring videos, expanding their understanding and appreciation of the various features.

The centerpieces of Centennial Park will be:

- The 20-foot-tall granite Soldier’s Statue, featuring male and female drill sergeants.
- The Wildcat Amphitheater overlooking the Soldier’s Statue. With a 150-person capacity, the amphitheater will serve as a venue for re-enlistment, promotion and retirement ceremonies as well as marriages and other events.
- The Foreign Theater Plaza featuring bronze reliefs depicting and honoring the soldiers who fought in America’s past military campaigns. The four reliefs now on display at the Jackson Boulevard traffic circle at Gate One will be moved and augmented with reliefs from Granada and Panama, Desert Storm, Iraq and Afghanistan.
- The Pathway of Patriots will contain various memorials highlighting the history of Fort Jackson and the role the Army fulfills in protecting the nation’s liberty and freedom.

Turner said he expects contributions to flow in from across the nation. “Fort Jackson has impacted the lives of so many American unlike any other post,” he said. “Once they learn what we are doing here, they will answer our call.”

TO DONATE

Contributions can be made a gatewaytothearmy.org. The organization is also selling personalized pavers for \$200 apiece.

Donations can also be sent to:

Gateway to the Army Association, 4611 Hard Scrabble Road, Suite 172, Columbia, SC, 29229

Gifts are offered for different levels of giving:

- \$5,000: Andrew Jackson level — table at the dedication gala
- \$2,500: Post Commander level — invitation to the dedication gala pre-reception
- \$1,000: Brigade Commander level — part of the stone from the actual statue
- \$500: Battalion Commander level — replica statue
- \$250: Command Sergeant Major level — commemorative pathways paver
- \$100: Drill Sergeant level — plaque
- \$50: Squad Leader level — challenge coin
- \$20: Wildcat level — name in the commemorative book

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- Television personality Joe Pinner

CENTENNIAL PARK FEATURES

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- The Pathway of Patriots will contain various memorials highlighting the history of Fort Jackson and the role the Army plays in protecting the nation's liberty and freedom. It will also carry the names of major contributors.

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