

Education Foundation looks toward the future, Part 2

By: **D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | December 26, 2006**

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second part of a two-part article discussing the current status of the Oak Ridge school system and the multi-million dollar overhaul of Oak Ridge High School.

Last week the history of the Oak Ridge Education Foundation up to the present was discussed, and the column gave a glimpse of the desired future for education in Oak Ridge. This week's column will see the completion of the history of the foundation and will identify fundraising efforts and plans for continuing the success.

Billy Stair, who figured prominently in the resurgence of the foundations efforts and UT-Battelle's decision to support the drive to upgrade existing facilities and construction of new portions of the Oak Ridge High School, recently observed that the Oak Ridge community was indeed unique as he recently was presented the Muddy Boot Award. Billy said, "Find me one other community in the United States of 28,000 people where they could build a \$55 million high school. You can't do it!"

The year of 2006 has seen enormous changes in the landscape of the Oak Ridge High School. The foundation's dream is fast becoming a reality. As construction progress continues, many other aspects of the things needed to assure a state-of-the-art high school are being brought into play as well. This is truly becoming a community project replete with pride of accomplishment throughout the city and across all age groups in our town.

The construction of the new gym is especially visible right now as one travels Providence Road. The new curved section facing north dominates the streetscape on the front of the complex. The round buildings are soon to be gone! The new entrance from the Turnpike is taking shape. The artists' conception drawings are now becoming more visible in the actual facilities. Excitement is building across the community and within the schools. The foundation, which could understandably take pride in the accomplishments thus far, is looking more and more to the future and the fundraising that is needed to assure continuity of efforts to sustain the momentum.

The present membership on the Oak Ridge Public School Education Foundation is: Thom Mason, chairman; Pete Craven, treasurer; Cathy Toth, secretary; Beth Adler; Bill Biloski; Gerald Boyd; Jim Campbell; Tom Clary; Jim Helton; Bill Lenihan; Jim McCarten; Ann McNees; Bill Pardue; Pat Postma; Barry Stephenson; Ron Townsend; Tanya Vargas and Alex Zucker. What a tremendous group of dedicated individuals formed into a cohesive high performance work team (replicating Blankenship's "workshop" approach) that is serving as a model for cities who desire to supplement public school funding to assure state-of-the-art schools.

Recently Pat Postma, Pete Craven and Kay Whitman conducted a workshop for the Tennessee Association of Community Leadership's statewide conference, held here in Oak Ridge, where they described the foundation's efforts and successes. The conference participants were here from all across the state and they all were most impressed with what is being accomplished in Oak Ridge.

While funds continue to be raised, to date the foundation has succeed in obtaining \$823,000 from business/subcontractors and \$2.2 million from individual gifts and pledges, as well as UT-Battelle's \$2 million, ORAU's \$1 million, BWXT Y-12's \$1 million, Bechtel Jacobs Company's \$500,000, and Wackenhut Services Oak Ridge's \$500,000. There have been 935 different donors! What a hugely successful fundraising effort, and there is even more to come.

One last thought: the sales tax referendum passed when no other tax-related referendum in the entire state of Tennessee passed. We are truly unique. Oak Ridge values education and is determined to do whatever is necessary to assure our schools are superb and without peer anywhere in the nation or the world. We are intent on being well beyond merely "state-of-the-art" and fully expect to set the standard for other school systems seeking to be "state-of-the-art."

Oak Ridge has historically led Tennessee and often even the nation and the world in education. We expect to continue to be the best in education. The efforts of ORPSEF have helped assure that Oak

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Ridge High School has the best possible facilities with which to maintain excellence in education. Don't you know that Dr. Blankenship would be exceedingly proud of what is happening now? I know that Dr. Bailey sure is.

Billy Stair was right on target in 2003 at that meeting at Jeff Smith's home when he recognized that Oak Ridge took enormous pride in our education system being an excellent one. With the recent success of high school seniors Scott Molony, Steven Arcangeli, and Scott Horton, as they won the \$100,000 prize in Siemens Competition in Science, Math & Technology, the nation's premiere high school science competition, it is evident that something is going quite well at Oak Ridge High School and also at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, where \$800,000 was provided to continue the project that these three students worked on during the past summer.

As James Kelley of Apple Computer, at the recent talk he gave to the Oak Ridge Rotary Club, noted that good buildings and modern technological infrastructure are crucial steps toward creating 21st-century schools that effectively teach the "digital natives" — kids who cut their teeth on computer technology, who instant-message and easily work with word processing, spreadsheets, e-mail, use i-Pods and cell phones with ease. However, he cautioned, "It's what's happening in those buildings to promote 21st century skills development" that really counts here.

When commenting on the recent success of Scott, Steven and Scott, he said, "The Oak Ridge community should take great pride in the accomplishment of the three young men and what they have done by winning the national Siemen's Competition. As a Tennessean the award makes me proud to know that we have students in Tennessee public schools with the drive, determination and access to the resources to do what they did. What continues to trouble me is that many of today's students, the digital natives, in our schools have the potential to do similar great things if we provided all students with the innovative educational tools and resources that are available to only a few. I believe the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation has a vision for doing just that!"

I hope you agree with James Kelley that the ORPSEF surely does have a vision for providing ALL Oak Ridge students with 21st-century innovative educational tools and resources as well as excellent facilities and infrastructure. The renovation of Oak Ridge High School is certainly a start in the right direction. The fund-raising efforts led by Ron Townsend and Jeff Wadsworth, and the continuing leadership of Pat Postma and Thom Mason as well as the rest of the foundation, are all contributing to successful 21st-century education in Oak Ridge.

The future of education in Oak Ridge is bright indeed. Blankenship would be proud of us. Postma, Mason, Townsend, Wadsworth, Myrick, Bailey and others are leading in ways that not only emulate Dr. Blankenship's "workshop-style" leadership, they are promoting Oak Ridge's primary basic strength, as identified by Billy Stair, and through effective fundraising, involvement of the community and the school administration, they are taking Oak Ridge into the 21st century.

We thank you leaders for the dedication and determination you exhibit for the rest of us to follow. Continue to show us the way. Billy Stair's "moment in history" is here for the taking: let's grab on and take hold of the future! Oak Ridge truly is a city where science keeps on making history and education keeps on leading the way.

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New tall structure of north frontage demonstrates changes being made to physical facilities