

BENTON HARBOR

Parkland swap hits U.S. snag

Park service rejects golf deal for beach

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The National Park Service nixed a controversial plan to use part of Benton Harbor's Lake Michigan beach for a Jack Nicklaus Signature golf course.

The proposal was the centerpiece of a 530-acre, \$500-million resort and luxury home development touted as a way to retain and create jobs and tax base in Michigan's poorest city.

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The federal agency's decision Tuesday also was a blow to Gov. Jennifer Granholm, who publicly backed the Harbor Shores project as a way to uplift Benton Harbor four years after rioting there and to keep Whirlpool Corp. headquarters there.

Under the plan, scattered parcels of land elsewhere would have been traded for land in city-owned Jean Klock Park. Three of 18 golf course holes, with panoramic views of Lake Michigan, were to be built on parkland. The city agreed earlier this year to lease the parkland to the project forever in exchange for \$30,000 per year.

Construction has started on the golf course, scheduled to open in 2009.

State officials and the developers said they will appeal the ruling. "We're not backing away from this project," Granholm spokeswoman Liz Boyd said. "Lots of work has gone into it, and we're very committed to it."

The state and developers plan to discuss with the park service what might be done to move the project forward, she said.

Critics said the project would mostly benefit wealthy Whirlpool executives and golfers, not city residents. Granholm backed the project after Whirlpool threatened to leave last year. The Whirlpool Foundation is one of three entities developing Harbor Shores.

The state offered funding and tax incentives worth more than \$120 million to the project.

"It's a disappointing setback," Benton Harbor City Manager Dwight Pete Mitchell said. He said a

different land swap might be necessary.

"We'll do whatever is needed," Mitchell said.

Besides rejecting the land swap, the park service said there had never been any public environmental hearing on the plan. The parcels proposed in return for the parkland were nearly all contaminated.

Opponents of the swap were thrilled Wednesday, fearing the plan would have set a bad public precedent. The park was deeded to the city in 1917 by John and Carrie Klock to honor their daughter, who had died in childhood.

"The National Park Service saw it for what it was, a complete privatization plan," said Carol Drake, a member of the local Save Jean Klock Park group. "Anything that would circumvent this decision would be a travesty."

Drake said there is no other land that could substitute for the park, which includes a half-mile of beach as well as dunes, forests and wetlands.

Instead of trying to find new land to swap for the park, the city and developers should find an alternative to using the park for three holes of golf, she said.

LuAnne Kozma, state director of In Defense of Place, a national parks protection group, said, "This is a great victory for Benton Harbor residents and for everyone who is concerned about our parks being given away or exploited by private interests."

Whirlpool referred questions to Harbor Shores. Mark Mitchell, a trustee and spokesman for Harbor Shores, remained optimistic a satisfactory agreement could be reached with the park service.

"We'll address their issues to their satisfaction," he said.

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