



Guest op-ed: Hugh McDiarmid, Jr. on the Jean Klock Park trust

By Hugh McDiarmid 4/23/08 1:31 PM



[Ed. note: Michigan Messenger is pleased to welcome Hugh McDiarmid, Jr. as a guest; he shares this op-ed about Jean Klock Park and the proposed Harbor Shores development in Benton Harbor.]

The massive Harbor Shores redevelopment project proposed in

Benton Harbor would inject new economic vitality into a community that sorely needs it.

But the cost - the snatching of beautiful publicly-owned Lake Michigan sand dunes that were legally deeded for eternal use as a public park a century ago - is more than the citizens of Michigan should be willing to bear. Once this legal agreement is torn asunder, no Michigan conservation easement, land trust or preservation agreement is safe from developers with clever legal strategies and powerful political connections.

The controversy over the dunes at Jean Klock Park has split a community. Opponents rightly contend it is an environmental justice issue. The most scenic portions of a public park, utilized almost exclusively by minority residents of one of the state's poorest communities, would be appropriated by Harbor Shores to build a fancy golf course that few Benton Harbor citizens could ever afford to play.

The "compensation" land that the developer proposes in trade includes several unconnected patches of swampy brushland, and some access

points to the St. Joseph River. Some of these parcels are contaminated with toxic chemicals, and others are already owned by the city.

Until recently, Harbor Shores was viewed largely as a local or regional dispute.

Continued -But what truly accelerates this issue into one of statewide significance is the troubling example it would set for thousands of similar land trusts and conservation easements throughout the state.

Those legal agreements — setting aside key natural lands to remain undeveloped and accessible to the public — are deeded by people or organizations with vision, passion and generosity.

That was the case in 1917, when John Klock donated the spectacular Benton Harbor dunes and lakeshore to the citizens in the memory of his deceased daughter, Jean Klock.

Twisting the Jean Klock Park trust agreement into an unrecognizable form will weaken all such trusts. “The land you’ve donated” — future agreements might say — “will be preserved forever, or until deep-pocketed developers with political connections and an army of attorneys decide they need it.”

Who in their right mind will donate land to the public in perpetuity with the knowledge that their gifts to the people can be unwrapped and torn up so easily?

Were these dunes located in moneyed communities like Bloomfield Hills, East Grand Rapids or Lake Forest, Illinois, no developer would dream of taking public park land for private use.

That it is being considered in Benton Harbor is not right, not fair, and it shouldn’t happen.

Hugh McDiarmid Jr. is the communications director for the Michigan Environmental Council, a coalition of 70 environmental, public health and faith-based organizations across the state.