



State OKs privatization of Benton Harbor waterfront

By Eartha Jane Melzer 6/18/08 7:54 AM

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has approved a controversial plan to build a Jack Nicklaus Signature golf course on Benton Harbor's waterfront park.



This is the second time the state has approved the project, known as Harbor Shores, which was re-proposed after the National Park Service (NPS) rejected the plan last year.

State and federal approval is required for the project because it involves the conversion of a public park which has been improved with taxpayer money.

Last Monday night, the Benton Harbor city council gave its approval to the proposed conversion.

"We are predominantly a poor African-American community," said city commissioner Ralph Crenshaw, who voted to approve the park conversion. "Some people don't want our people to have any kind of quality of life. We are trying to provide the maximum opportunity for the majority of people considering the circumstances that we are in."

Continued -Jean Klock Park constitutes 75 percent of Benton Harbor's parkland and some believe that signing much of it over to developers for a golf course — even if the project could bring jobs — is unfair to the people of Benton Harbor because it would take away a large chunk

of the city's public recreation space and there would be less space for people who can't afford golf.

LuAnne Kozma of the park preservation group Defense of Place said that the state erred in approving the proposal so quickly.

In 1989, the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund gave Benton Harbor \$375,000 to protect the "delicate dune ecosystem," she points out, but no environmental impact study has been done to determine whether building a golf course on the dunes would damage them.

"The state has also failed to follow its own guidelines in approving the conversion," Kozma said.

Any transfer of parkland requires that new parkland of equal value be created. In the case of Jean Klock Park, developers have had the 22.11 acres of dunes and lake-view property appraised at \$900,000. In compensation, they are offering a package of parcels including a 1.47 acre parcel of land on the Paw Paw River. An environmental assesment of this parcel conducted by Wetland and Coastal Resources Inc. states that it consists partly of an abandoned asphalt roadway and is located next to the city water tower. This piece was donated by the Whirlpool corporation and appraised at \$714,000.

State law requires that two appraisals be done for parcels valued at over \$500,000, Kozma said, and only one was done in this case.

Jim Wood, director of DNR grants management, said that the state required no further information about the plan, and that there was no need for review by the Natural Resources Trust Fund, which reviewed and approved a similar Harbor Shores proposal in October 2006.

"We found that the city addressed all of the issues that were raised during the public comment period," Wood said.

The NPS will now decide whether to allow the park conversion to move forward.

Opponents of the golf plan are planning a federal suit to block the park conversion should it gain approval from the NPS.