

Park Service saves Benton Harbor lake front

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Corporate land grab halted

By Teresa Kelly

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BENTON HARBOR — Because of a 1975 federal grant for a new bathhouse, the 90-year old Jean Klock Park, a pristine half mile of Lake Michigan beach and dunes, has been snatched from the hands of Whirlpool and its development arm, Cornerstone Alliance and will remain a public park.

In a letter dated Oct. 16, Ernest Quintana, regional director of the National Park Service, denied the city's and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources' request to convert 22.11 acres of Jean Klock Park to a privately owned Jack Nicklaus Signature golf course.

City residents apparently overwhelmingly oppose the land grab, but have not had the mandated 30-day comment period to make their views known, according to Quintana.

"It's a blessing the National Park Service could see to the heart of residents' concerns and honored the fact that this park was a gift to us to be here for future generations," said Emma Kinnard, activist and city resident.

John Nellis Klock and his wife Carrie in 1917 deeded the 90-acres of lake front to the city for a park [See box] in honor their daughter Jean who died in childhood.

For decades the plan to take Benton Harbor's lake front land for golf course, marina and other commercial ventures has circulated among non-resident economic "developers" from Whirlpool Corp. and Cornerstone Alliance.

In 2004, local citizens filed suit to stop the sale of a piece of the park for residential development. To settle the suit and protect it from any further losses, the plaintiffs settled with the agreement that no more land would be taken from the park.

However, acting under the auspices of Harbor Shores Community Redevelopment, Inc. officials of appliance giant Whirlpool — whose international headquarters are located in Benton Harbor — presented plans last summer to take the lakefront land for three holes of an 18-hole course.

A wide coalition of concerned citizens and groups organized against the grab, claiming many laws had been violated in the process, primarily, the public was prevented from knowing or seeing the full plans.

Friends of Jean Klock Park (www.savejeanklockpark.org), the Defense of Place (www.defenseofplace.org), and Olson, Bzdok, and Howard www.envlaw.com and citizens faced an uphill battle against the local corporations and their influence in government and the daily paper, the Herald-Palladium.

"What was unknown to us and the public was that before and during the 2003 litigation 20 year plans were in the making by Dave Whitwam former Whirlpool CEO which were supported by Jeff Fettig, the current Whirlpool CEO, and Cornerstone Alliance, the Whirlpool-founded Chamber of Commerce, to take control of this publicly owned Lake Michigan park", says the Save Jean Klock park website. "We discovered their undisclosed intentions to use Jean Klock Park for the golf course in December of 2004, eleven months after the Consent Judgment was awarded."

City commissioners approved a draft version of the golf plan a year ago and in January signed a

99-year lease.

According to Commissioner Juanita Henry, who voted no, the final version was substantially different than the draft plan.

No citizen has yet seen the final draft of the golf course plan, according to LuAnne Kozma, Defense of Place. She noted there are 27 golf courses within 30 miles of Benton Harbor.

"From the beginning the people of Benton Harbor have been led to believe that a golf course is the only option available to rid the city of poverty and oppression and are being forced to choose jobs over their park and environment when they should be entitled to have both jobs and their natural lake front environment," Carol Drake of the Friends of Jean Klock Park says. "Throughout they have been excluded from the decision making process and their concerns for the park have been ignored by their city leaders, Congressman Upton and Governor Granholm, who have assisted Harbor Shores with the permit process through State Regulatory Agencies."

Granholm has focused on Benton Harbor since the uprising in 2003 following the death of a motorcyclist under pursuit by a Benton Township police officer. Activists say the governor is out of touch with the real people on issues in the city and deals only with corporate spokespersons or "pawns".

The National Park Service has a duty under the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund to protect boundaries of parks receiving funds, Kozmo said. Over the years the city has received \$1.74 million in such federal and state funds for the park.

"This decision reaffirms that public parks rightfully belong to the public," she said.

The city was offering its residents 28 scattered sites as replacement for the seized acreage, some of them already recreation land. The Park Service letter said such replacement lands were "insufficient in magnitude, capacity, and viability to mitigate the subject 22.11 acre or any larger conversion."

City residents use the park for baptisms, swimming, picnics, family reunions, jazz and blues concerts and cooling off on hot summer nights.

Benton Harbor is 92% Black, and for three decades has been one of the nation's poorest cities despite millions of dollars in development funds over the decades. The money has gone to similar schemes that never meet residents' needs or trickle down to the neighborhood level.

'See to it, that the park is the children's'

"In taking an inventory of life, we all take stock of the circumstances surrounding the happiest moments. The giving of this park to the city of Benton Harbor has been to Mrs. Klock and myself, the happiest moment of our lives. The deed of this park in the courthouse of St. Joseph will live forever. Perhaps some of you do not own a foot of ground, remember then, that this is your park, it belongs to you. Perhaps some of you have no piano or phonograph, the roll of the water murmuring in calm, roaring in storm, is your music, your piano and music box.

"The beach is yours, the drive is yours, the dunes are yours, all yours. It is not so much a gift from my wife and myself, it's a gift from a little child. See to it, that the park is the children's."

- John Nellis Klock at the 1917 park dedication

