

## Jean Klock Park: Benton Harbor close to making an irreversible mistake

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Benton Harbor city leaders appear on the verge of a shortsighted move to sell off a chunk of Jean Klock Park for the development of high-priced homes.

They shouldn't do it.

The land was donated in good faith to the city nearly a century ago and designed to give city residents a lasting beachfront park. Although several members of the City Commission say that the park won't suffer much, because only 4 acres will be developed (about 5 percent of the park), what they downplay is that any development within the borders of the park represents a broken trust that can never be reversed. Once the land on the park's northern border is sold off to developers - who plan to carve up the lucrative property into 28 lots - that land can never be reclaimed for the public use that it was intended for.

At present perhaps the park's northern edge does not get much use. But forever is a long time. In 10 years, 20 years or 50 years, who knows, future city leaders may decide to renovate the park, and that northern edge might be integral in revitalizing a park that sadly has too often been neglected or mismanaged.

As it stands, the city has worked hard to upgrade the park and make it a more available destination for residents. It is true that the deal to sell the land includes a handsome return for the city, which leaders vow will be used in part for park maintenance, but again, this is short-term thinking. Jean Klock Park is by far one of the city's most valuable assets. We don't see how developing its northern edge enhances this asset over time. Rather, it does the opposite.

There are also key questions about whether the city can even proceed with the plan without inviting a challenge from the state. As pointed out in a letter to the editor by a former DNR grant coordinator, the state might very well seek compensation if the city violates binding grant agreements. We also wonder about the overall legalities of the plan, considering that the deed states the park should be used for "public purposes."

Those who care about the park should attend Tuesday night's City Commission meeting (7 p.m. at commission chambers) to let the city know how they feel about this plan. They should speak now, because once the decision is made and bulldozers start clearing lots, the land will be forever lost.

City leaders need to hear in clear terms what people think of this plan, which if it goes forward would represent a sad triumph of dollars over sense.

(An opinion of The Herald-Palladium editorial board)