

City delays vote on park sale

By LYNN STEVENS / H-P Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, May 28, 2003 12:00 am

BENTON HARBOR -- With questions lurking, the Benton Harbor City Commission did not vote Tuesday night on a plan to sell a piece of Jean Klock Park.

City Manager Joel Patterson told the audience of more than 70 people that he removed the item from the agenda because the city attorney wanted more time to review "certain documents."

He did not specify what those were.

He told the standing-room-only crowd that it is "more than likely" commissioners will vote on the sale at their meeting next Monday night. Developers would like to buy 3.8 acres on the park's northern edge and would build 28 upscale houses.

Removing the item did not deter the visitors from expressing their opinions about it.

Sixteen people - only four of them city residents - told commissioners what they thought of the proposed sale.

Several people said they remembered fondly growing up in Benton Harbor and going to the beach at Jean Klock Park. Roy Shoemaker, a city resident all his life, agreed with people who told commissioners the park is an irreplaceable city resource.

"We have a gold mine here we're parceling out to people for profit," Shoemaker said.

He advised commissioners to look carefully at developers' motives in promising to pay the city 75 percent of appraised value if they were unable to resell any of the 28 lots two years after buying them.

Alison Elizabeth Christian said she grew up in Benton Harbor but lives in Niles. She told commissioners she intends to return to live out "the most senior years of my life" in Benton Harbor.

"I consider the comments of city commissioners out of line to sell Jean Klock Park," she said. "I think you're getting the feeling this is not what we want. You, as public servants, cannot allow it."

Nicole Moon, a city resident, said she used to live near public beaches in St. Joseph and urged commissioners to look at Jean Klock Park differently from those beaches.

"The dunes (in St. Joseph) were taken down and what replaced them were parking lots and a playground for children," Moon said. "What's at Jean Klock Park is what was meant to be here."

It's not a Disneyland. ... Silver Beach is a wonderful place for people who enjoy that kind of beach. Jean Klock Park is a different kind of beach - please don't destroy it."

Some speakers pointed out that Jean Klock Park is not heavily used. They said access to the park is difficult: Either the gate to the parking lot is locked, or the boarded-up office/greeter's stand makes it seem closed. People have to walk two blocks from the parking lot - if it is open - to get to the developed park of the beach.

Commissioner Ralph Crenshaw objected to "the fact a lot of people lived here and abandoned the city and have come back to criticize."

He told them it reflected on their character that they would leave, then return only to direct others who stayed with the city through the hardest times.

Commissioner Hurley Wallace said he agreed with Crenshaw.

"It's pretty bad to have somebody desert the city then come back to criticize," he said. "If you want to do something positive, move back and help make the city better."

But he complimented them for at least attending a public meeting and starting to get involved in local government.

Commissioner Steven McCoy responded to a transplanted Chicagoan's question about what the city would do with the \$500,000 guaranteed on the sale of the first seven lots.

"The citizens elected us to represent their interests," McCoy said. "One of those interests is to increase the tax base. If you can help us, help us. Come back to the city. Help us build our tax base. Then we can have some of the things our residents need."