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Benton Harbor park becomes a battleground



Jean Klock Park

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A proposal involving Jean Klock Park in Benton Harbor is creating some controversy. The city wants to sell nearly four acres of the beachfront park for an upscale housing development and still keep most of the park for public use. Opponents say making any portion of the park private is wrong.

Jean Klock Park is 78 acres of unspoiled lakefront land. Ronald Taylor has lived above the park for nearly 50 years. "It's simply a priceless heritage for the city of Benton Harbor and priceless piece of property that's irreplaceable."

But Benton Harbor has a price for the public park: \$500,000. The city wants to sell four acres along Grand Boulevard to private developers to build 28 upscale homes.

Financial benefits

Benton Harbor's city manager Joel Patterson says, "With additional homes, additional people, that somewhat ensures greater utilization of the park itself, which is certainly what we'd like to see."

Patterson also likes the financial benefits such as new property tax dollars that could dig Benton Harbor out of debt. "It will create a tremendous infusion of cash flow into our budget over the next four years. We quite frankly can't find any negatives."

But Ronald Taylor can. He's a former judge and he says this sale is illegal. "This property was given to the city in 1917. Very clearly says for the use and benefits for the citizens of the area. The bottom line is that they are prohibited from using that property."

Taylor also fears after this sale, the city may go even further. "It seems to me that if there's money to be made in a small strip here, there's huge money to be made down there by the lake and in increments, soon you won't have the park at all."

Put to a vote

The Benton Harbor Common Council will vote on the proposal Monday night. If it passes, Ronald Taylor says he, and other concerned citizens may take the issue to court and file a lawsuit to stop the sale.

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