

Developers taking Benton Harbor for a ride

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Editor,

First, the mayor and commissioners of the city of Benton Harbor are to be congratulated. Finally they found a way to involve the larger community in the plight of the community's largest city: Threaten to develop Klock Park. Most of the standing-room only crowd at last week's meeting complained that the city was getting greedy at the expense of a great natural resource that will be valued even more in the future.

However, just the opposite is true. The leaders of Benton Harbor are not being nearly greedy enough!

To say that the portion of Klock Park to be developed is only 5 percent of the total land is perhaps true, but much like saying your right arm is only 5 percent of your body.

The problem is that while the developers behind this project become millionaires, the city takes away only \$500,000 after the first eight houses are sold. What's with that? If you and I buy a property, the seller wants our money upfront. Why isn't the city getting its share up front?

While developing a portion of Klock Park for the benefit of the citizens of Benton Harbor may be a good idea, the city is not getting a good deal. Lakefront property bordered by a beautiful park is worth a lot more than a few hundred thou!

But let's say that 500 grand is the best deal city fathers and mothers can make. What will happen with the money? "Pay taxes," was the only answer offered by the leaders.

What if the city got \$500,000 up front and used half of it to train citizens in construction jobs and the developer agreed to hire these trainees for the project? What if the other half was used to seed a revolving fund for renovation of boarded up homes in Benton Harbor and the developer agreed to give free materials, labor and expertise for one renovation for every three homes built on the parkland?

Such programs would have a lasting positive effect on the city of Benton Harbor, its people and the surrounding communities. The problem with the mayor and commissioners is not that they are greedy, but rather that they are not nearly greedy enough and are not thinking big enough about how to use Klock Park to the long-term benefit of the city and its citizens.

A measly \$500,000 is not nearly enough to destroy one of the area's dwindling lakefront resources. And the developers apparently have not been asked to guarantee jobs, training and housing improvements to the citizens of the city.

To those folks protesting the development at the meeting: While your hearts may be in the right place, face it, money talks. If you want to fend off the development, you need to fight fire with fire. If the going price for parkland in Benton Harbor is \$500,000, then you'd better have \$500,000 to offer the city to keep it from developing the park. Better yet, raise \$500,000 for the city's use and an additional \$500,000 for programs like those described above. I for my part will put up \$1,000 to get things rolling. Are there 499 others willing to join me, or even better, 999 others who want to do something truly lasting to help Benton Harbor, its residents and that larger community?

Paul A. Camp

Benton Harbor