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St. Joseph-Benton Harbor, Michigan

The Newspaper for Southwest Michigan

Wednesday, June 04, 2003

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## Park plan: Expect more wrangling over controversial decision

Several Benton Harbor city commissioners resent that many non-city residents showed up to vent their frustration at Monday night's meeting, where the Commission voted 6-3 to move forward in the sale of a small portion of Jean Klock Park. And it is true that ultimately commissioners are answerable to city residents.

But regardless of where the main opposition is coming from, it does not obscure the fact that Benton Harbor residents are not being served well by its leadership, which voted to allow developers to buy park land to sell for upscale homes. As a justification, the city says that it can use the money from the sale - \$500,000 up front with the promise of more profits down the road - to help defray mounting debt. Even if you put aside for a second the short-sighted nature of selling off a chunk of one of the city's oldest and most valuable assets, we wonder whether this deal will actually end up costing city taxpayers a sizable amount. How much is anyone's guess.

At least two issues threaten the windfall that the six members of the Commission majority envision.

First, last week DNR officials told Benton Harbor that it could not sell off land within park borders without receiving prior state and federal permission. The reason is that Benton Harbor has accepted several grants over the years to upgrade the park. Selling park land would represent a "conversion" of the land to non-recreational use, which requires prior approval from state and federal agencies.

Commissioners did not bother to address this concern at Monday night's meeting. If they feel their legal standing in this matter is sound, the reasoning behind their confidence was not explained.

In addition, it seems likely that the city will be sued by people attempting to thwart development of the park. That was hinted at Monday night at the meeting. Is the city going to pile up a fortune in legal fees fending off a lawsuit that sounds to the average layman like more than a nuisance suit?

City commissioners, after just two weeks of public debate on a key issue, were quick to approve the project in concept and move on. But this won't be the last word. The state, and perhaps private lawyers, will see to that.

□(An opinion of The Herald-Palladium editorial board)

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## Stay involved: Government works best when residents are paying attention

Rare is the public official who hasn't walked into a roomful of angry residents waiting anxiously for a meeting to start. It happened twice this week, as city commissioners in Benton Harbor and St. Joseph both faced sometimes contentious audience members who were not happy about the way the business of local government had been handled.

In Benton Harbor, the city is taking all kinds of heat for its decision on Monday, by a 6-3 vote, to sell a small portion of Jean Klock Park. We've been among the critics on this issue.

Many St. Joseph residents turned out to a meeting to discuss the redevelopment of the old St. Joseph River Yacht Club property. With the Yacht Club moving to the old Lighthouse Depot building, owners of the site are subdividing it. The bee in many bonnets on Tuesday evening was a request (that was withdrawn) to slightly increase the height of the homes by raising the grade of the site.

Along with the upset residents, the two meetings shared something else: A sense from commissioners that it would be great to see more people week in and week out, rather than only when there are hot issues to debate.

St. Joseph Mayor Mary Goff said it well Tuesday. "Every time we have a meeting with this many people, I say, 'Stay concerned.' Send a representative. Call. Stay involved in your local government."

It is something for all Southwest Michigan residents to think about. Like the citizen who never votes and then complains about the people in office, a resident who tunes out local government - except when there's a hot issue that affects him - risks being taken less seriously by those in charge.

We would never go as far as to suggest that citizens don't have a right to complain. After all they are still paying the taxes that fund local government. But better involvement from citizens leads to better government all the way around. Leaders will work harder for the citizenry if they know people are paying attention and appreciating the effort.

Or, if you're more cynical, leaders may avoid corruption or currying special favor if there is an indication that enough people are watching.

Either way, people should pay more attention to the workings of local government.

(An opinion of The Herald-Palladium editorial board)

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