

## Former Benton Harbor Mayor Wilce Cooke raps commission's sale of Jean Klock land

By LYNN STEVENS / H-P Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, June 5, 2003 12:00 am

BENTON HARBOR -- Former Mayor Wilce Cooke, who is running to regain his old job, said he opposes the sale of land in Jean Klock Park for private residential development.

"This is not the first time the issue has arisen," Cooke said Wednesday. "When I was mayor, there was a group that wanted to purchase land there ... and I refused. There are other avenues of raising revenues."

Cooke was mayor from 1982-1987, during some of Benton Harbor's worst economic times. The year before he took office, city employees faced no fewer than six pay-less paydays and the city was on the brink of state receivership.

Cooke said he refused in part because of the terms of the 1917 bequest of the Klock family, which, as he understands it, could revert to Klock heirs if the city fails to live up to terms of the agreement. Among those terms are keeping the park open as a park with complete public access.

Her said he also never felt a sale was in the best interests of city residents.

In the case of this week's sale, Cooke said he would have held a public referendum before making a decision.

"The thing is, the city doesn't belong to the government, it belongs to the public and government just represents the public," he said. "The city can sell anything within its jurisdiction, but would it be legal?"

In light of the Department of Natural Resources' request that the city ask permission before converting any parkland to a non-park use, Cooke said he would have dealt with that before a City Commission vote. He pointed out that the DNR said failing to seek permission first could result in sanctions as severe as eliminating the city from future grant consideration.

Cooke said the city relies heavily on grants, and by ignoring the DNR's request's officials could be shooting itself in the foot.

Cooke said he expects the sale of 3.8 acres to Grand Boulevard Renaissance, LLC, to be challenged in the courts.

"The park is not only for the people of Benton Harbor, but also for the county. It's a county issue," he said.

Cooke said the land in question is more valuable than the \$500,000 the developers have promised the city. He said the sale could set a dangerous precedent.

"If you start selling off one parcel, what's to say someone won't come back and you'll sell off more and more," he said.