

Harbor Shores Wins Jean Klock Park Lease for Golf Course - By a Vote of 7-2 by the City Commission on a Draft Proposal

After considerable effort and much debate lead by Commissioner Juanita Henry and Mayor Wilce Cooke regarding the lease agreement between the City of Benton Harbor and Harbor Shores Community Development Inc., the commission voted to approve a draft of the lease agreement to be used for a Jack Nicklaus Golf Course.

Commissioner Henry explained that due to a family emergency, she was not able to attend the meeting held last Wednesday, had requested a copy of the tape, and had not received it until just before Monday's meeting. She had not had time to review properly everything that was in the agreement. Furthermore, she explained that what she had been given was marked "draft" and she had not received a final version.

Mayor Cooke agreed, stating that he had some questions that he needed answered and suggested that if they could just postpone the vote until next week it would give everyone time to meet together and discuss. "That way when the commission voted, they would present a united, informed, responsible, decision-making body," he continued.

After much debate, Commissioners Ralph Crenshaw, Glenn Yarbrough, and Eddie Marshall stated that they had had time to get all of their questions answered. Commissioner Yarbrough then stated to Henry, "If you don't have time to read this now, you are never going to have time." Commissioner Hill stated that he had missed the meeting, but trusted his fellow commissioners and the information that his colleagues provided.

Henry stated again that what she had in front of her was a large "draft" of a lot of information that she had not had time to review and wanted to know what had changed in the document that she had received. She had a number of concerns. She explained that she had read the package that she had received; it appeared that "the benefit package will be controlled by the Harbor Shores people." She had a problem with "the people who were getting the money also controlling the benefits." She wanted to know, "What is the problem? Why can't this be tabled for one week?" Mayor Cooke also expressed concern that he wanted the city's attorney, who was not present at the meeting, to review the final lease agreement language. Commissioner Yarbrough responded with, "Mayor, you still don't understand? Why? You had plenty of time to discuss this with the attorney."

"We're here to protect the best interests of the citizens," Mayor Cooke responded. He repeated that he felt it was in their best interests for the commissioners to get together, discuss and resolve all concerns, and come through as a "united front."

Since Henry's motion to table the decision for a week was not seconded, a vote could not occur. Crenshaw then called the question for a vote.

Commissioners Marshall, Harold Hampton, Rahim Abdullah, Crenshaw, Hill, Ruthie Haralson and Yarbrough voted for the lease agreement draft and Mayor Cooke and Henry voted against.

Following the vote, Henry stated that she "cannot wait to talk to the radio stations and TV stations about the secret meetings and what is really going in with city government. As long as we have closed door meetings and commissioners micromanaged, it will continue, stated Henry. She instructed the citizens to listen to 96.5 fm and 103.5 fm because she will be going on the station to talk and tell the citizens all she knows.

Hampton commended the commissioners on their teamwork effort. He said, "Let the facts talk for themselves." He "despises when people mislead our people. We need to work together to make the dream come true. It is up to the commissioners to make sure the facts are true."

City Manager Pete Mitchell thanked the city commissioners who worked so hard to get this lease agreement passed. He stated that the final document of the lease agreement had not been approved until 5:30 p.m., so he had the final documents to hand out to the commissioners after the meeting. "The benefits package is where we now will be working to get the citizens' input." "All citizens that have issues; we listen to you," stated Crenshaw. "If you do what is right in your decision, if God is in your decision, you won't make a mistake. Our desire is to do what is best for the citizens."

Mayor Cook once again reiterated that he wants the commissioners to reconsider in the future that if a commissioner has questions or concerns that perhaps they should delay any vote until those questions are answered and the issues resolved.

During the public comment portion of the meeting, Scott Elliott of Benton Harbor, read the letter that the mayor and commissioners had received that afternoon from Attorney Scott W. Howard, representing the Friends of Jean Klock Park. It specifically requested that, "...you read this letter into the record prior to any vote on the proposed lease language." The letter also stated, "As you are of course already aware, the park is subject to both a deed restriction and a consent judgment that limits the use and development of the park." The letter continued, "We believe strongly that the current proposed lease is prohibited by both the deed restriction and the Consent Judgement. If the City chooses to enter into the lease, it is our intention to challenge the lease in court." It went on to state that it was believed that the golf course did not need to be built in the park and, "could be built outside of the park along with the development which would be truly a 'win-win' for the City. However, if the City decides to sacrifice a portion of the park in return for the golf course, we will pursue all legal remedies to challenge that decision."

Larry Streeter, of Benton Harbor, wanted to know about how the public access to Lake Michigan through Jean Klock Park was going to change. Mr. Mitchell stated that citizens would be able to access through Grand Boulevard on the north. That road would go straight to the beach and would eventually connect with the road that runs along the beach that is currently under sand. They would be building a new road on the south end, not on Jean Klock Park land, that would run along the water plant and connect with the beach road from that end.