



Import

Godsend or land grab?

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BENTON HARBOR — A string of people who spoke at a public hearing Thursday night said the massive Harbor Shores project offers Benton Harbor its best shot at a real economic turnaround in years. Others see the project's linchpin, the proposed use of 22.11 acres of Jean Klock Park for a golf course, as a land grab that will do little to benefit city residents. A spillover crowd jammed a meeting room at the Michigan Works building on Main Street to speak their minds. About 150 people attended the 3½-hour hearing and more than 60 spoke for the record. People waited in line patiently for a turn to speak for three minutes, comments that will be weighed by the National Park Service in its decision to allow the parkland conversion. Backers outnumbered opponents 42-17, according to an unofficial count. Another eight speakers did not take clear positions or called for better cooperation from all. "I don't care where the money comes from," said Benton Harbor resident Frank Joseph, who cited the need to fix Benton Harbor's century-old infrastructure. "I haven't heard one person tonight step up to the mike with another plan," said Joseph, whose uncle, Charles Joseph, was the city's first black mayor. Nancy Clark Byrne, 86, a former Berrien County commissioner, grew up in Benton Harbor living next door to J.N. Klock and his wife, who donated the park to the city in memory of their daughter. Byrne said the city has no money to keep up the park "but Harbor Shores does." J.N. Klock, she said, "would be so thrilled with this project." "For the first time, I see some real hope for my city." "But some people said leasing a chunk of the park for the golf course flies in the face of what the Klocks required in donating the land — that it remain as a public bathing beach or for park purposes." "The park was given to the children of Benton Harbor 90 years ago," said Pati Heinz of Benton Township. "If people are OK with this, where are your morals?" Others questioned the accuracy of an appraisal used by Harbor Shores that put the value of the 22.11 acres of park property at \$900,000. The parcel includes no Lake Michigan frontage or property on the lake side of the dunes. Mitigation property, seven scattered parcels totaling about 38.41 acres that would be added to the park system in exchange for use of the park land, was appraised at \$999,500. "I see it as very inappropriate to be giving away property," said Benton Harbor resident Hurley Wallace. Hugh McDiarmid Jr. of Farmington, speaking for the Michigan Environmental Council, said the proposed trade "is an insult." "We contest that the golf course is public when on most days it will be limited to the few who can afford the green fees," he said. Under a revised plan, Harbor Shores Community Development, the non-profit organization behind the project, would link the mitigation parcels, most of them on the Paw Paw River, to downtown Benton Harbor and Jean Klock Park through a 12.2-mile network of trails and boardwalks. The mitigation parcels are to be improved with such amenities as fishing platforms, boat ramps and picnic tables. Harbor Shores would also agree to a laundry list of other terms, including major upgrades of Jean Klock Park, once a major Lake Michigan attraction but now rundown and neglected because the city cannot afford to maintain it. The hearing is part of a process to allow the public to comment on a revised Jean Klock Park Conversion and Mitigation Proposal. The NPS has veto power over the conversion because federal money was used to improve the park years ago. The developers say obtaining the long-term lease of the Jean Klock acreage is necessary to complete an 18-hole Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course. The course is expected to be the magnet for \$400 million in development, including two hotels, 800 housing units and other construction over 500 acres in Benton Harbor, Benton Township and St. Joseph. Although the hearing was limited to comments on the conversion and mitigation, several people spoke of the broad implications of the Harbor Shores project. Among the speakers were Benton Harbor city

commissioners and other officials. Barclay Johnson of St. Joseph said J.N. Klock, while serving as Benton Harbor mayor during the early years of the Great Depression, helped revive the city. Klock was also ruthless in pushing people to do their part in Liberty Bond drives in World War II. "He would have little use for people stuck in victimhood and entitlementhood," Johnson said. Randall Rood, Berrien County's parks director for many years, said the mitigation plan would better be described as a "rescue and revitalization plan." "I believe this provides ... an extraordinary opportunity for Jean Klock Park," he said. Octavia Wilburn, 17, of Benton Harbor, appeared to be the youngest speaker. While several people spoke about preserving Jean Klock Park for children, she said, "we need a change, we need transformation." "We are the future. This is for us," she said. "We need to have fun." Melvin Pullins of Benton Harbor said he goes to Jean Klock Park and finds it "uninhabited." "To grow you got to make moves and make some changes," he said. "If not now, when?" City Commissioner Eddie Marshall, who supports the conversion, said the community has been "saturated" with misleading information. "As a commissioner, I want to plant the tree for the generation that's coming behind me so they can get the shade," Marshall said. Contact Scott Aiken at saiken@TheH-P.com.

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