



Import

Golf course facing tight timeline

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Published: Sunday, July 6, 2008 3:00 AM EDT

BENTON HARBOR — An agreement between Benton Harbor and Harbor Shores for the use of Jean Klock Park is still under review by the National Park Service, and developers say their timeline for opening the golf course by next summer is getting tight. Harbor Shores wants to lease 22 acres of the 73-acre city park on Lake Michigan for three holes of a Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course. The NPS is examining the agreement, as well as hundreds of letters submitted by citizens and organizations to decide whether to allow the park to be used for the golf course. Other portions of the course are under construction, and Harbor Shores has set the goal of opening it next summer. But, the timeline for construction is getting tight if developers are going to meet that goal, according to Wendy Dant Chesser, president and CEO of Cornerstone Alliance and a Harbor Shores trustee. "We have a relatively short construction season in Michigan, and we still have a lot of work to do before the first frost," Chesser and Bob McFeeter, director of development for Evergreen Development, wrote in an e-mail. If the NPS approves the Jean Klock Park conversion, several construction projects have to be completed before the park's 22 acres can be built into three golf holes. Harbor Shores will need to build a new public access road parallel to Michigan 63 and a road and parking area for access to the Jean Klock Park beach before eliminating the existing parking lot and access road. At that point, developers would be allowed to start building holes seven, eight and nine of the 18-hole course. The course's grass needs to be planted before the fall frost date, which is usually in mid-October, Chesser and McFeeter said. "If it gets to late August, we're in trouble. If it gets to July 15, we might have some decisions to make," Chesser said. For example, she said, grass for those three holes might have to be planted as sod instead of seed. Bob Anderson, NPS grants administrator for the Midwest Region, said the park service is under no official time constraint or deadline by which it has to make a decision. "There's only an internal kind of thing where we try to be as diligent as possible," Anderson said. The NPS received the application June 16. "This is the second time we've seen this application," he said, referring to a similar application from Benton Harbor and Harbor Shores that the NPS rejected last year. "As a result, our review shouldn't take all that long." However, he added, park officials have to read the estimated 3,000 pages submitted by the city, developer and other groups weighing in on the project. Part of the reason the NPS rejected the application last year was that Benton Harbor did not hold a sufficient public comment period. This time around, the city accepted comments for 45 days. "The volume of the second application is quite extensive," Anderson said. "There's a lot of stuff there, a lot of reading." He said the NPS will not consider the developer's schedule or other work going on in the 530-acre Harbor Shores project when making a decision. "Because of the emotional nature of the issue on both sides, we want to make sure everyone's comments are taken into consideration and that any decision we make is legally defensible," Anderson said. Representatives from Defense of Place, a national organization that works to protect parks, do not think the application should even be in the National Park Service's hands yet. LuAnne Kozma, the organization's Michigan director, objected when the Michigan Department of Natural Resources forwarded the conversion agreement to the NPS without approval from the Natural Resources Trust Fund Board. The board approved the initial agreement in 2006, but not the new agreement with its revisions. Harbor Shores is offering 38 acres in other parts of Benton Harbor as mitigation for the use of Jean Klock Park. But Defense of Place and others who support preserving the park as is have said the mitigation parcels match neither the recreational nor monetary value of the 22 acres that might be turned into golf holes. Carol Drake, vice president of Friends of Jean Klock

Park, also said she thinks the Harbor Shores process has moved too quickly thus far. "I applaud the park service for taking their time in reviewing it," Drake said. She would not say whether park preservation groups plan to appeal the decision if the NPS approves conversion. While Harbor Shores developers wait for a decision on Jean Klock Park, other parts of the project continue to hum along in Benton Harbor, Benton Township and St. Joseph. Roughly one-third of the golf course is slated to be built in Benton Township. The Township Board of Trustees approved the plan June 3. In May, the St. Joseph City Commission approved Harbor Shores' plans on "Parcel 4," a 50-acre piece between Michigan 63 and the Paw Paw River north of the CSX railroad tracks. The development will include three holes of the golf course, as well as 30 lots for custom-built houses. On June 2, the Benton Harbor City Commission approved a utility agreement with Harbor Shores for use of city rights of way for irrigation lines to water the golf course. Harbor Shores is building the golf course and its associated buildings, as well as selling the Parcel 4 lots, Chesser said. Other parcels slated for homes, hotels and other development in the project's 530 acres are intended to be prepared to sell to other developers, which will build in accordance with the Harbor Shores site plan, she said. The agreement between Benton Harbor and Harbor Shores says developers explored other possible layouts for the golf course to avoid the need for land in Jean Klock Park. No viable alternatives were found that would offer similar views of Lake Michigan and bring as much development to the city, the agreement says. Contact Kevin Allen at kallen@TheH-P.com.

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