

Larger than local

Harbor Shores is becoming a national story, and with good reason, say both its proponents and detractors – the issues it raises are universal in nature

By KEVIN ALLEN

H-P Business Writer

It should come as no surprise that Harbor Shores is attracting national media attention, people close to the development proposal say.

The Chicago Tribune, Chicago Reader, Detroit Free Press and Washington Post have covered the controversial plan for a \$430 million golf, marina, housing and hotel development that would stretch across 530 acres in Benton Harbor, St. Joseph and Benton Township.

National Public Radio has also done interviews for a report, which has not yet aired.

The articles describe the contrast between Benton Harbor and St.

Joseph, Whirlpool Corp.'s influence in the area, the region's racial segregation and economic hardships, while questioning whether Harbor Shores can fix what ails Benton Harbor.

And, of course, they all mention the civil unrest that drew international attention in 2003.

Jean Klock Park is ground zero for the controversy communicated in the articles. The Chicago Reader calls the park "a sort of Harbor Shores sand trap."

The only lakefront park within the confines of Benton Harbor, Jean Klock Park is the proposed site of holes seven, eight and nine in a Jack Nicklaus Signature golf course.

People on both sides of the controversy say the story line plays well across the country because Harbor Shores is a unique development set against a backdrop of economic, environmental and social issues that affect all Americans.

"There are issues that are sort of universal in nature, about the battle over where we draw the line of what is appropriate economic development," said Hugh McDiarmid, spokesman for the Michigan Environmental Council.

McDiarmid

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said the National Park Service would set a dangerous precedent if it allows Harbor Shores to lease 22 acres of the 73-acre park, which was given to Benton Harbor as a gift in 1917.

Harbor Shores' developers – a nonprofit consortium of the Alliance for World-Class Communities, Cornerstone Alliance and the Whirlpool Foundation – has offered some 40 acres of land in other parts of the city as mitigation for the use of Jean Klock Park.

"From our standpoint, the visibility is important, that it be seen as something larger than just a local issue," McDiarmid said. "Some of the principles involved transcend the immediate issues that are of concern to people in Benton Harbor and Berrien County."

By most measures, Benton Harbor is the poorest city in the nation's most economically downtrodden state, said Marcus Robinson, a Harbor Shores trustee and president and CEO of Community Development Consortium.

Yet a massive amount of capital is being invested in the community and, what's more, the proposal is being driven by nonprofit organizations with a purpose to help local people improve their lives.

"I don't know of any other place in America where a development of this size is going into a community of this size," Robinson said.

He said members of the media expect to come to town and find "Goliath

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beating up David." But the real story they have found, he said, is one of creating hope and opportunity in a community that sorely needs a stimulus.

"Folks have a hard time believing good things," he said. "I'm foolish enough to believe we can do this. We can end hunger here; we can end homelessness here."

Carol Drake, vice president of Friends of Jean Klock Park, doesn't see it that way.

"This is a huge controversy and is precedent-setting, and I'm not surprised at all that people from all over are watching this," she said. "It is more than just a local story."

Drake said the organization's Web site receives a sharp increase in traffic after a newspaper article appears in another market.

"We get e-mails from people all over who say how important it is to not let this park be used for these purposes," she said. "A lot of people are paying attention to this."

Cindy Arch, who works in Novi as executive director of Defense of Place, said she is grateful the story has been exposed on a national level.

"The more light that is shone on this type of thing, the better," she said. "It's all about people making up their own minds, putting the information out there to help them make their own decisions."

She said the issue of Jean Klock Park is not

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just about one city's public space.

"If you think about how things are lost, they change over time," Arch said. "It's not one thing that comes in all at once; it happens in bits and pieces.

"Vulnerable places are going to be the first ones to go down."

Wendy Dant Chesser, a Harbor Shores trustee and president and CEO of Cornerstone Alliance, said the articles from the national media have been "fairly balanced." She doesn't think the coverage has had much effect on the community's perception of Harbor Shores.

"Of course, we hope that someone who reads the Chicago Tribune or the Washington Post would have a good impression of Benton Harbor," she said.

Jeff Noel, a Harbor Shores trustee and Whirlpool's vice president for communications and public affairs, said the media attention suggests that Harbor Shores developers are creating a good product.

"It also sends a message that the not-for-profit organizations developing Harbor Shores are on to something," he said.

Noel said he thinks there are several facets that make Harbor Shores interesting to newspaper readers in other places.

He said the Twin Cities' struggles with the economy and race relations reverberate around the nation. Harbor Shores could provide the solution – or at least part of the solution – to those well-publicized challenges, he said.

He said he has no objections to any the media coverage of Harbor Shores.

"I'm a big believer that when an issue is as complicated as this one, that if the reporters take the time to write about it, it helps people make informed decisions," Noel said.

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GET IT RIGHT

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