

GUEST COLUMN

## Jean Klock Park belongs to the public – forever

Benton Harbor residents opposed to the takeover of their lakefront public park, and other admirers of Jean Klock Park, can take heart in knowing that a federal agency is looking out for the public. The National Park Service's Land and Water Conservation Act grant program is a federal law created to help our nation protect its system of public parkland in perpetuity. No matter if the park is local, regional, state or national, any park assisted with Land and Water Conservation Act Funds is protected from conversions to other uses.

Confusing ploys, typical of those who try to take parkland from the public, are being used by Harbor Shores. They call their plan an "improvement." They misrepresent the actual impact. They understate the amount of acreage that would be taken from public use.

Most glaring is the dishonest claim that only 22 park acres would be taken for the golf course. It's no wonder the developer and the city are hiding maps of the development from the public. The maps show the footprint of the golf course consuming all of Jean Klock Park's 73 acres except for the beach. And even the beach would be compromised with a parking lot.

Another claim is that the park would be expanded. Not so. Small parcels, inside the new golf course, on Harbor Shores' private land are proposed as Benton Harbor's new, replacement public parkland. These scattered parcels would not be a new and expanded park. They're just more of the golf course development. This is not the first time elaborate golf course plans masquerading as "public golf" have been proposed by private developers using parks. Most departments of natural resources around the country haven't fallen for them. Michigan's Department of Natural Resources, on the other hand, is allowing a developer to call the shots. Benton Harbor has no community recreation plan, yet is allotting well over half of the city's recreational space for golf. The DNR should be slamming the door shut on this flawed plan.

Even if there were no court agreements in place binding the city from further development in Jean Klock Park, the LWCF restrictions still protect the park. But there are court agreements. Just that the city and state must have National Park Service approval shows plainly that the golf course is a development.

While it sounds perfectly reasonable to want to increase a park's visitation,

it is the public purpose that the LWCF protects. It's not numbers of people that define public purpose, but who is allowed access – "high rollers" only, or all people, with equal access to the entire park.

Parks fall into disrepair and disuse from time to time, including some of our greatest city parks. Cities wanting to transform and revitalize their communities value their public open spaces. They revitalize their parks and turn these public places around. They do not remove them from public use.

I am sure Harbor Shores can devise a creative and appropriate development without taking the public's parkland.

Imagine if the governor spent a fraction of the taxpayer dollars she is pouring into Harbor Shores on employing Benton Harbor residents in a youth conservation program, like the park improvement programs of years past. Imagine if the park were refurbished, and the dunes, beach and open space of Jean Klock Park were made the centerpiece of the entire Harbor Shores development. Imagine if there were summer camp programs for Benton Harbor kids at the park, so that "no child is left indoors" as the governor is urging for all (other) kids in the state. Jean Klock Park, after all, is dedicated to the children.

The developers, the governor and other elected officials supporting this plan cannot hide from the truth forever. Eventually it will be obvious to all that the Harbor Shores plan would destroy the dunes and turn nearly all of Jean Klock Park into a privately-owned golf course.

What puzzles many people is how such an environmentally destructive plan can move forward when it is critical that corporations and governments make responsible environmental decisions.

All of the public – in and beyond Benton Harbor – are stakeholders in Jean Klock Park. Let elected officials and the corporations leading this development know that the right thing to do is to protect and enhance the park.

Can this mixed-use development reach a turning point? Can the greater Benton Harbor community – the businesses, the citizenry, the elected officials, the recreational users of the park – rededicate itself to protection, stewardship and green corporate citizenship, that will keep a beautiful park in the public trust forever?

LuAnne Kozma is the Director of Defense of Place Michigan, an advocacy group that works to assure parks, open spaces, and wildlife refuges stay protected in perpetuity.

Top

Do You Have Itchy Watery Eyes from SEASONAL ALLERGIES??

CLICK HERE!

**DR. FLOOD'S VISION CENTER**  
1380 E. Napier Ave.  
Near the Orchard Mall

269-926-7277