



Overflow crowd debates privatization of Benton Harbor waterfront park

By Eartha Jane Melzer 4/21/08 10:15 PM



Marcus S. Robinson, CEO of Citizens for Progressive Change, spoke in favor of the Harbor Shores proposal. He told the people of Benton Harbor to "recognize leadership and follow it."

About 300 people jammed into a public hearing in Benton Harbor Thursday to speak out on a plan to transfer part of the city's public lakefront park to developers for use as a Jack Nicklaus Signature golf course and luxury housing development.

Benton Harbor, one of Michigan's poorest and most segregated towns, is under pressure to turn a portion of Jean Klock Park over to developers

connected to the Whirlpool Corp. — the home appliance giant that operates its world headquarters in the town. A network of Whirlpool-affiliated community groups are backing the project, and the golf course has been promoted as part of an economic development plan that would create jobs and benefit local residents. The state of Michigan has offered \$120 million in tax breaks to support the plan.

At the hearing, approximately 60 speakers seemed almost evenly split with supporters tending to make shorter, simpler statements and opponents offering more passionate and detailed criticisms.

Many supporters said the park is underutilized, the city is too broke to maintain it and that "change is good." Some even said the golf development was "God's will." Critics raised legal and environmental

concerns about the plan and spoke bitterly about the inequality in negotiations between Whirlpool-connected developers and local residents.

Continued -“We trusted corporate America to take care of our towns all these years,” said Benton township steelworker Dave Heinz, who pointed out that Whirlpool has outsourced most of its manufacturing and is now demanding the city park for exclusive recreation by executives. “Should we trust them again?”

Heinz said the project could actually reduce jobs available to locals. The Whirlpool-dominated local Chamber of Commerce has “chased off” companies seeking to locate manufacturing facilities in Benton Harbor, he claimed. He suggested two local factories, Modern Plastics and New Products Corp., may be forced to close if a luxury golf course is constructed across the street.

Benton Harbor’s lakefront area has undergone conspicuous changes in recent years. The area around the park, which is walking distance to Whirlpool offices, has been built up with expensive homes. Whirlpool CEO Jeff Fettig lives in this neighborhood, as does Whirlpool heir and Republican U.S. Rep. Fred Upton.

A few locals said that many residents are now so impoverished that they cannot afford the gas money to drive across town and access the park. Others said the appraised value for the 22 acres of lake view property sought by developers — \$900,000 — is unfairly low.

Dennis Knowles, a Benton Harbor resident said, the proposed park transfer would leave the city “gentrified, cashed out, put out, not included.”

He criticized the developer’s offer to trade the 22 acres and its stunning views of Lake Michigan for a series of unconnected parcels along the nearby Paw Paw and St. Joseph Rivers.

“Cancer is a reality when you look at the ecology of the parcels offered in trade for the park,” Knowles said, noting that developers have acknowledged that the parcels offered in trade for the park are contaminated with industrial waste.

Advocates of the golf course development countered that fewer residents use Jean Klock Park than in decades past. Some locals expressed frustration with environmentalists who have focused on the ecological damage that a golf course would do to the dunes.

“You don’t care when our kids are shot down in the street like dogs,” one woman said, “but you want to fight for this cause.”

Carl Brecht, a Benton Harbor business owner, claimed that the plan

does not guarantee that the construction and maintenance jobs associated with the project will go to African Americans, who make up 90 percent of the residents of Benton Harbor.

The issue of jobs was also raised by Barney Brooks, a carpenter and Benton Harbor resident who said that he has been unable to find work despite extensive training, certifications and experience.

"I hate to think that that my family's future is contingent on a golf course getting built," he said, but he urged anyone to contact him if work is available.

The public hearing was required by the National Park Service, which must approve the proposed transfer of Jean Klock Park. City manager Richard Marsh said that the city will now consider issues raised by residents before deciding whether to approval the proposal and submit it to the Park Service. The public comment period is open until May 3.

The Friends of Jean Klock Park, a group opposed to the land transfer, have posted the developer's proposal, maps, and other documents relevant to the controversy on their [Web site](#).

Some history on Jean Klock Park and discussion of the golf course proposal can be found [here](#).

Comments can be sent to the Benton Harbor City Manager's Office, 200 Wall St., Benton Harbor MI 49022.