

For Immediate Release: June 17, 2008

Contact:

LuAnne Kozma Defense of Place 248-207-5670
defenseofplacemichigan@gmail.com

DNR FAST-TRACKS GOLF COURSE IN JEAN KLOCK PARK

Benton Harbor Residents and Supporters Outraged at DNR's Approval

Trust Fund Meeting Bypassed in Rush to Develop Public Park's Dunes

(Benton Harbor, Michigan) – For the second week in a row, the government failed the taxpayers – and the children – of Benton Harbor, as the Michigan Department of Natural Resources rubber-stamped a Whirlpool-backed plan to put a private golf course in the 91-year-old Jean Klock Park. The State government's Natural Resources Trust Fund Board was cut out of its legal responsibility to review the plan when the DNR wasted no time in giving away Benton Harbor's public parkland fronting Lake Michigan to a developer whose plan has been funded by the \$18-billion dollar company and championed by Governor Jennifer Granholm.

Opponents of the plan learned on Monday that despite contractual and government requirements, a grants manager signed off on the deal and forwarded the proposal to the National Park Service.

Neither the Department of Natural Resources' grants division staff nor any Trust Fund board member placed the Jean Klock Park conversion proposal on the agenda for the meeting slated to take place tomorrow in Mackinaw City, 320 miles from Benton Harbor, instead of the board's usual location in Lansing.

According to the lease agreement between Harbor Shores Community Redevelopment Inc. and the City of Benton Harbor, the lease is "contingent upon approval by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR), Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund Board (MNRTF) and the National Park Service (NPS)..."

And because the Trust Fund Board oversees DNR handling of so-called conversions of public lands to other uses, the bureaucratic signoff is considered premature, if not illegal, by advocates who say Klock park must remain as open public parkland.

Residents and former residents of Benton Harbor and Defense of Place had planned to appear before the Trust Fund to convince the board to reject it, even though the board had preliminarily approved a similar proposal in October 2006, which had not been revealed to the public for required comment.

--more--

Benton Harbor City Commissioners approved the plan ten days after receiving 400 public comments on the project, the bulk and volume of which were provided by opponents to the privatization scheme.

In a seven-page letter to the Board Monday, park supporters, Defense of Place and members of Friends of Jean Klock Park implored the Trust Fund to discuss the proposal and put the matter on their agenda at a future meeting held closer to Benton Harbor. The letter outlined numerous violations of law the Trust Fund and the DNR would make if either granted approval to the flawed conversion proposal.

Among their points:

The changes in the proposed lease agreement of 22 acres of Jean Klock Park parkland render it a perpetual lease, which the Attorney General's office cautioned against.

The bulk of the mitigation value (approximately 80%) is in a single parcel - a 1.47-acre contaminated post-industrial Whirlpool Corporation property appraised at \$714,000. Mitigating this parcel for the loss of 22.11 acres of dunes and Lake Michigan views in Jean Klock Park (only valued at \$900,000) is unacceptable due to contamination issues, its eventual location in the city of St. Joseph and its lack of recreational viability. The view from the mitigation parcel is of industrial buildings.

The park and Parcel H properties, while valued at over \$500,000 had only a single appraisal prepared to determine value, when MNRTF policy specifically states that two appraisals must be obtained.

The Trust Fund grant awarded to the park in 1989 was for restoration and preservation of the dunes of Jean Klock Park, and that conversion of those dunes violated the Trust Fund policy of "property acquired or developed with MNRT Fund assistance...shall be retained and preserved in its natural state . . . as set forth in the MNRTF application." The application language and purpose of the \$375,000 grant to Benton Harbor was for "preservation of fragile sand dunes and wetland wildlife habitat."

The State cannot approve any conversion without a Community Recreation Plan without violating state and federal law and MNRTF policy. The City of Benton Harbor does not have a Community Recreation Plan.

The Marram Shores illegal sale and conversion of Jean Klock Park in 1998 remains unmitigated. The DNR and National Park Service have yet to require the City of Benton Harbor to replace that lost parkland to the residents of Benton Harbor. The group insisted that replacement parkland be found to make up for that loss before any further conversions are considered, and that was not done.

--more--

“As a former resident of Benton Harbor, I am disappointed by the disgraceful and craven cowardice and corruption of those state officials who style themselves as progressives, yet sit back while a gift of recreational property to the people of Benton Harbor is stolen through the collusion of corporate and golfing interests abetted by elements in pro-apartheid St. Joseph who are slated to take over the beach-front parkland in decades to come. The combination of greed, racism and political opportunism stinks to high heaven,” said John Woodford, of Ann Arbor and a signer of the letter to the Trust Fund board. “Knowledge of history ought to tell all involved in this heist that their names will be encrusted in muddy shame to the enlightened people of succeeding generations who will uncover and analyze these events.”

"I'm not surprised with the rubberstamping of this proposal. When the vast array of vegetation in JKP is dismissed by the developer's environmental assessor as 'obnoxious plant material,' I didn't expect much. All of our concerns were dismissed as easily," said Judy Jones, a Benton Harbor resident and business owner.

“Violating all these DNR and Trust Fund policies and state and federal regulations was a serious mistake on the State’s part,” said LuAnne Kozma, Michigan Director of Defense of Place.

To obtain a copy of the letter to the MNRTF Board, contact LuAnne Kozma at Defense of Place: defenseofplacemichigan@gmail.com

For updates on Jean Klock Park, visit www.savejeanklockpark.org

###