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People draw line in sand over \$500 million golf course and residential project

By WSBT News1

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BENTON HARBOR — People in Benton Harbor voiced their opinions on the use of Jean Klock Park for part of Harbor Shore's Jack Nicklaus golf course Thursday night. Some people want the \$500 million project, but others don't want to sacrifice park land.

The National Park Service requires a 30-day public comment period before park land is developed. It turned down the initial Harbor Shores proposal because there was no public comment.

So Thursday night, the city of Benton Harbor and developers heard from more than 300 people on a trade-off, which would involve leasing part of Jean Klock Park to Harbor Shores in exchange for additional park land.

And people were divided.

Jean Klock Park is attracting attention and visitors from around Michigan.

"It is not often that you see big chunks of land on Lake Michigan," said Eartha Melzer, a Traverse City resident who visited the park Monday afternoon.

Harbor Shores wants to lease 22.11 acres of the 74-acre park for three golf course holes.

In exchange, Harbor shores would add 38 acres of land to the park and would invest \$2.5 million in park updates and upkeep.

"Why should Benton Harbor give up control of its most precious and irreplaceable asset in exchange for barely usable swamp land?" said Scott Elliot as he spoke against the project.

"Money, dollars and financing is needed to improve the park for public use because right now, it is not very welcoming to the public," said Rosie Nolan who spoke in favor of the project.

Many people are upset about where part of the Jack Nicklaus golf course is going -- on dunes.

"This is kind of sacred ground. People have been married there. People have been baptized there," said Patty Hines, a regular visitor to the park.

"The dunes will not be destroyed or taken down. If anything, one of the reasons we are requesting to put the golf course on the dune is so golfers will have a views of Lake Michigan," said Wendy Dant Chesser, spokesperson for Harbor Shores.

Using part of the existing park for a golf course is within the bounds of the original 1917 deed.

But many people have their own interpretation.

"The city of Benton Harbor can apply for state and federal grants. This action would preserve Jean Klock Park, honor the donor's wishes and stay within legal bounds," said Kim Risk who wants the park itself to be a tourist destination.

"Given the situation of 2008 and the economic situation of Michigan, John Klock [the man who gifted the property in memory of his daughter who died in infancy] would have said, 'Do it, do it now, why haven't you begun before?'" said Barkley Johnson who wanted Klock's biography entered into public record.

People have until May 3 to submit written comments to the city clerk.

The Benton Harbor City Council has two weeks to respond to the concerns. It will then submit those opinions, their response, and the park proposal to the National Park Service.

If it's approved, they'll break ground at the park this summer. The golf course will be completed next year.

Construction has started on other parts of the course. But if the National Park Service turns down the proposal for Jean Klock Park, the project could be stopped. Developers say financial backers are investing in a golf course with a spectacular view, which they won't have without the park.

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