



# Benton Harbor, Mich., bets on golf course by Jack Nicklaus

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By [Steve DiMeglio](#), USA TODAY



Nile Young Photography, KemperSports

Harbor Shores in Michigan, a 530-acre beach and golf resort community, features a Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course.

Benton Harbor, Mich., is banking on [Jack Nicklaus](#) and golf.

The small city in the state's southwest corner — just 90 miles from [Chicago](#)— is following the lead of its neighbor, St. Joseph, which evolved into a thriving Midwest tourist destination after both communities were devastated by six manufacturing plant closings in the 1980s.

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Facing an uncertain future and an industrial wasteland near Lake [Michigan](#), Benton Harbor, home to about 11,000 and an unemployment rate of 17%,

created a coalition of public and private entities intent on cleaning up manufacturing brownfields, stimulating tourism and creating jobs. The key component of the work and the centerpiece of a \$450 million redevelopment effort over the next 20 years is Harbor Shores, a 530-acre beach and golf resort community that features a Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course.

Today, city officials and local leaders will announce that Nicklaus will open the course — a rolling, 18-hole course featuring views of Lake Michigan from three holes — on Aug. 10. He'll be joined by former rivals [Arnold Palmer](#), [Tom Watson](#) and [Johnny Miller](#) for a charity Skins Game at The Golf Club at Harbor Shores.

"The event is a great opportunity to highlight how golf is being used as a vehicle for social and economic revitalization," Nicklaus says. "The area needed to be cleaned up, and as a result, create a stimulus for the area, for the community, for the town, for tourism and for jobs. It did a lot of really good things."

Nicklaus, 70, a renowned golf course builder with nearly 350 courses worldwide, faced a tough task when called on in 2005 to transform acres of diverse land along the St. Joseph River and Paw Paw River, dunes that rise up to 100 feet above Lake Michigan's beaches, and acres of long forgotten factories, toxic waste dumps and a Superfund site.

"We had to have a golf course designer who was sophisticated enough to deal with lots of empty buildings, roads, power lines, a railroad track, two rivers, a lake and a public park," says Mark

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Hesemann, managing director of the Harbor Shores Resort.

Nicklaus, he says, had to change the course routing nearly 20 times.

### Big plans in works

The course crosses into three jurisdictions — Benton Harbor, St. Joseph and Benton Charter Township. All have a stake in Harbor Shores, which, if fully built, will include two hotels, a town center, health and fitness center, boutique lodge and spa, conference center, a marina village and marinas, a water park, a river walk, retail shops and restaurants. It will also have 12 neighborhoods with nearly 800 residences, including cottages, custom homes, town homes and condominiums.

"The overall economic development strategy has been centered around focusing on our quality of place," says Wendy Dant Chesser, president of Cornerstone Alliance, a group that works on economic development. "We're laying the foundation, which we believe will increase our ability to be competitive in creating jobs, and bringing in new and increased consumer spending."

The course already has led to the removal of 170,000 tons of debris and contaminated soil. It's a public course and will provide access to the local First Tee program for kids and teens, the [Boys and Girls Club](#) and local high school golf programs.

Despite the trend of golf participation falling in recent years — the National Golf Association, a golf industry research and information organization, reported that the number of golfers in the U.S. fell to 28.6 million in 2008, down from 30 million in 2005 — Benton Harbor officials say Nicklaus' golf course can attract economic development. The city, they say, is geographically suited to lure vacationers. It's 90 miles from Chicago, 160 miles from Indianapolis and 170 miles from Detroit.

"What the Harbor Shores development does is help redefine the area in terms of the word 'vacation,'" says [Marcus Robinson](#), president of the Consortium for Community Development. "This is a non-profit effort. The basis for this was to use this economic enabler to drive real change in the neighborhoods and communities. All the net gain from the development effort goes into a community chest that is reinvested into the community."

### Successful example

Benton Harbor hopes to mirror the success of its neighbor. St. Joseph, a city of 9,000, is now a retirement community and a tourist destination with its beachfront property. Property values have increased 28% in the last five years, according to city manager Frank Walsh. Unemployment, he says, has fallen to 3%. A decade ago, the downtown vacancy rate was 22%. Today, it is 0%.

"What Benton Harbor and Harbor Shores have done is only going to enhance both communities," Walsh says. "This can only be beneficial for the entire (Berrien) county and area. This just doesn't happen very often in Small Town, America, but it's happening here."

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