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Can a Golf Course Save a City?

In a troubled Michigan town, a Jack Nicklaus project tries to spur a renaissance

By JOHN PAUL NEWPORT



Golf courses, especially championship-quality, Jack Nicklaus Signature golf courses, are not usually engines of urban rebirth. More often they are associated with the opposite: gated communities in the exurbs. But on Aug. 10, golf will assume this role in Benton Harbor, Mich., when Mr. Nicklaus tees off for the ceremonial opening round at the Golf Club at Harbor Shores, in an exhibition match with Arnold Palmer, Tom Watson and Johnny Miller.

The course itself, 6,861 yards long at par 71, is a beauty. The holes trail through marshland, along a river, through a hardwood forest and, most dramatically, into tall white sand dunes fronting Lake Michigan. Less than two hours by car from downtown Chicago, it should firm up the reputation of Michigan's so-called Great Southwest region as a golf destination. Harbor Shores will host the Senior PGA Championship in both 2012 and 2014.



Paul Octavious for The Wall Street Journal

The driving range at the Golf Club at Harbor Shores in Benton Harbor, Mich.

But the golf course, for all of its \$18 million price tag, was never as much about golf per se as it was about helping to breathe economic life into Benton Harbor, one of the most intractably impoverished communities in the country.

"I've been here since 1971, which is about when the lights went out in Benton Harbor," said Carolyn Graves, 62, a semi-retired office worker with no connection to the project. "Harbor Shores is really the first time I've seen any of the lights start to come back on."

During the first half of the 20th century, Benton Harbor and its "Twin Cities" neighbor, St. Joseph, were comparably prosperous small shipping and manufacturing towns, divided by the St.

Joseph River. Whirlpool got its start in 1911 in Benton Harbor and seriously boomed during the post-World War II years, churning out washing machines, dryers and refrigerators. Its factories attracted workers, many of them African-Americans from the South who settled in Benton Harbor rather than St. Joseph. That led, predictably enough in that era, to a white exodus. By 1980, Benton Harbor was 90% black and St. Joseph was 95% white—a ratio that hasn't changed much since.

Then the jobs started disappearing. Whirlpool and several other companies that supplied parts to the auto industry in Detroit 160 miles east shuttered factories. In one 18-month span in the mid-1980s, the Twin Cities lost 2,000 manufacturing jobs—a devastating blow for a community of less than 30,000 people.

St. Joseph, with four miles of lakefront property to market, muddled through by transforming itself into a second-home tourist destination. For 21 million Midwesterners living within a 250-mile radius, Lake Michigan is a prime

getaway spot. But Benton Harbor, more inland and with only a half-mile sliver of lakefront property, almost all of it in a city park, languished. More than 60% of its children live below the poverty line.

Despite considerable mistrust between the two cities, leaders from both sides of the river, along with Whirlpool executives, began brainstorming in the late 1990s ways to revitalize the vast acreage of abandoned factories and polluted brownfields in the riverfront flats between the two towns. The eventual master plan called for a 530-acre mixed-use development (800 residences, two hotels, a spa, a conference center, retail space) built around a world-class golf course. The course was always seen as the key component, both to establish an identity for the project and to demonstrate the natural and aesthetic potential of the former industrial wasteland.

For the residents of Benton Harbor, however, the golf course was controversial, especially since it would consume a large part of the town's tiny foothold on Lake Michigan, the public park. The beach itself would be left alone, but the dunes behind the beach would be leased out for holes seven, eight and nine. "When I stand on that dune, it's not worth anything, but when Jack Nicklaus stands on it and raises his golf club like Moses raising his staff, it's invaluable," one member of the organized opposition said in 2008.

Supporters of the course say that's exactly the point. "Without those holes through the dunes, the course would not have attained the greatness that Jack aspired to. It wouldn't have been a Jack Nicklaus Signature course," said Mark Hesemann, who worked on golf projects for many years with Nicklaus Design and is now the managing director of Harbor Shores. (As part of the lease deal with Benton Harbor, Harbor Shores has made significant improvements to the park, including the addition of 40 inland acres, and will pay for all ongoing maintenance.)

"From the community's standpoint, the main issue is whether Harbor Shores can drive enough value into the daily life of residents," said Marcus Robinson, who heads up the community-development side of the project. In the long term, that seems likely. The project is entirely owned by three local nonprofit foundations and all eventual profits will flow through them back into the community. Upon completion, projected for 2018, Harbor Shores will double the Benton Harbor tax base and directly create several hundred permanent jobs.

Even more importantly, said Mr. Robinson, "Harbor Shores is a reinvention of the brand of the city of Benton Harbor." Soon, if all goes well, the first glimpse of the city for travelers driving across the bridge from St. Joseph will be the new hotels, the marina and the golf course, instead of urban blight. Whirlpool last week announced that it will build and occupy three new office buildings, totaling 270,000 square feet, in downtown Benton Harbor, consolidating 1,000 jobs into the town.

Despite continued pockets of resistance and suspicion, Harbor Shores appears to be gaining local support. Ten holes have been open for a year, and the late-afternoon times when local kids are allowed to play free are wildly popular. Its First Tee program already has produced the winner of a full golf scholarship, at Mississippi Valley State. "Harbor Shores is not a cure-all for all the ills we've got," said Benton Harbor Mayor Wilce Cooke. "But it's an anchor for going forward."

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