Nicklaus course to revitalize Benton Harbor

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The Golf Club at Harbor Shores in Michigan.

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- By Adam Schupak
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Can golf be a vehicle for social and economic revitalization?

To hear Jack Nicklaus tell it, the latest golf course he built can save an entire southwest Michigan community.

"The project is really all about transformation," he said. "It's going to make a difference."

Indeed the plans for The Golf Club at Harbor Shores, a Jack Nicklaus signature design that opened in July, are almost as ambitious as setting out at a young age to break the "Golden Bear's" record 18 major titles.

Situated on a tract of land encompassing more than 500 acres that straddles Benton Harbor, St. Joseph and Benton Township, the golf course is the centerpiece of a 530-acre mixed use, real estate development – the designated catalyst for economic, environmental and social improvements in the community.

Beleaguered by the loss of manufacturing jobs dating to the 1980s, the Benton Harbor community went into a tailspin, suffering from an exodus of jobs – it has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country – and residents.

The revitalization project is a cooperative effort between The Alliance for World-Class Communities, Cornerstone Alliance, Whirlpool Foundation, the cities of Benton Harbor and St. Joseph, Benton Charter Township, Berrien County, the state of Michigan and others.

"It took some time to remediate the land," explained Mark Hesemann, a former employee with Nicklaus Design and now the managing director of Harbor Shores. "We had some challenges early on. That's all gone now."

The golf course at the center of the resort community sits on the watershed of the Paw Paw River and St. Joe River, which flow into Lake Michigan.

Harbor Shores is a resort community with residential opportunities from single-family homes to condominiums to town homes. When it is complete, there will be 12 distinctive neighborhoods with a total of nearly 800 residences. With its marina, beach access and convenient location – it's less than a half-day drive for 30 million people from cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and Indianapolis – there is hope it will become a popular vacation destination in the Midwest.

Nicklaus has experienced first-hand how a golf course can create new jobs, generate consumer spending and stimulate increased tax revenue. In the past, he's been involved in revitalization projects, including the transformation of a former dump in Detroit into the TPC Michigan, which opened in 1990.

In 1994, Nicklaus broke ground in Montana on Old Works Golf Links, the first course ever built on a Federal EPA Superfund site, where a historic century-old copper smelter once stood. The golf course revitalized the town of Anaconda by creating jobs and tourism.

But when Nicklaus went to check out the Benton Harbor property, he looked around and asked, "Where is it?"

"We had factories, toxic waste and dumps. We had everything you could possibly think of," Nicklaus said. "But we also had sand dunes on the lake, two rivers running through it, and beautiful wooded areas."

Gone are remnants of the former industrial wasteland. During construction, public park space has been rehabilitated, brownfields cleaned up and natural wetlands preserved.

"We cleaned up the areas in need of it and tied it together into a scenic golf course," Nicklaus said.

The PGA of America already has promised the 2012 and 2014 Senior PGA Championship will be played there.

As a show of his personal commitment to the project, Nicklaus persuaded his friends and former rivals Arnold Palmer, Tom Watson and Johnny Miller to participate in a ceremonial, opening-round fundraiser called "Harbor Shores Champions for Change." On Aug. 10, the foursome of legends will play all 18 holes of the course in a skins format with rotating two-man teams. Tickets, which cost $50, sold out.

"It's more than just a golf course," Nicklaus said. "It's a community revitalization project that I deeply believe in."