

TIME FOR BENTON HARBOR TO RISE UP!

Op-ed in the [Chicago Sun Times](#):

By Rev. Jesse Jackson, Rainbow PUSH

Benton Harbor's finances are a mess. How could they not be in a town stripped of jobs and hope? So, the state has stripped its residents of their democracy. In what is accurately termed "fiscal martial law," the state has named a czar to run the city. That appointee, Joseph Harris, has issued an order essentially stripping the elected city council of all powers. No money can be spent, no taxes raised or lowered, no bonds issued, no regulations changed without his approval. Benton Harbor's residents now live in a dictatorship imposed by a Republican governor famous for his belief that the poor should be punished and the rich rewarded.

This appointed dictator claims breathtaking powers. He can sell public assets, dismiss pension boards and take control of public pension funds and revoke labor contracts. What triggers this takeover? The law is remarkably vague. The governor may act if a payroll is missed, if there are complaints of late bill payment, if pensions are underfunded, if there is a significant budget deficit, a term that goes undefined.

This takeover is a recipe for the worst abuses of oppression, cronyism and corruption. And here, too, Benton Harbor is the example. One of the few citizen treasures in Benton Harbor is the Jean Klock Park, a half-mile of sandy dunes on the edge of Lake Michigan. It was bequeathed to the children of Benton Harbor by the Klock family in 1917 in memory of their daughter. But developers backed by Whirlpool now want to appropriate a large portion of the park to turn it into a Harbor Shores golf resort with a 350-room hotel, two marinas, a 60,000-foot indoor water park (for members only), and a fancy golf course open to all who can afford a \$5,000 entry fee and be approved by the club. The town's citizens have resisted this development, which is under litigation.

But the new czar's first act was to take over the Brownfield Redevelopment Authority, most likely as a way to proceed with the development and sidestep the lawsuits. Why be suspicious? Because the law that the new czar is operating under was introduced by Republican state Rep. Al Pscholka, former staff aide to U.S. Rep. Fred Upton, an heir to the Whirlpool fortune.

They've shut down the jobs, and taken over the schools. Now they want to shut down the democracy and turn the public parks into a rich man's playground. But in Benton Harbor, as in Selma and Montgomery, they forget even the poorest people have a sense of dignity. Dr. King wrote, "the ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people." In Benton Harbor, it is time for the good people to make themselves heard.