Asylum Lake Area Labeled Haven For Vandal

By Lane Wick
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Controversy sparked by trail-bikers and reported rowdies, lies heavy these days over the Asylum Lake property in the City of Kalamazoo.

Residents living near the about 240-acre parcel of land owned by the State Department of Mental Health have complained bitterly to city officials about problems there, according to City Manager James Caplinger.

And officials at the Kalamazoo State Hospital, who oversee the Asylum Lake property, say they now are ready to have trespassers on the site arrested, "NO TRESPASSING," signs have been installed around the property, but get torn down as fast as we put them up," says State Hospital administrative officer James Smolinski.

"Vandalism has been so bad there," Smolinski said, "a group of people were there threatening them."

Smolinski said the State Hospital work crew had first attempted to burn the dock, but failed in that endeavor and finally pulled it out with a bulldozer, then burned the pilings and timbers.

Removal of the dock sparked a letter to the Gazette from Bruce W. Taylor of 210 Allen Blvd. Taylor said he was appalled at the dock-burning attempt and he urged that the area be preserved for public use.

Taylor said he hoped the area would be maintained in its wilderness state "while giving the public access to this beautiful area."

At present, the Asylum Lake site, where, formerly, a number of state hospital buildings were located, is "surplus" to the needs of the state hospital. All structures have been removed.

State Senator John Welborn is working at having the state turn the site over to local units here for local purposes. County officials and City of Kalamazoo officials have met to discuss what could be done with the property. Several county commissioners have indicated they have high hopes of getting the property for park purposes.

In the meantime, the wooded area around the scenic lake is being ravaged, according to Caplinger, by trespassers. Trail bikers are both creating noise problems and ripping up hillsides, he said. Litter and debris are common.

“Our observation is that trespassers appear to be systematically destroying the area,” Caplinger said.

Nearby residents have complained often to police about noisy parties, rowdy behavior, littering, some nudity and other problems, according to Caplinger.

According to the State Hospital’s Smolinski, his departments “security people” have attempted to notify trespassers to stay off the property but they have been threatened and almost run off themselves in some cases.

“Constant vandalism” has been a major problem, Smolinski said, and that led to the removal of all structures.

“The whole area is just a problem, as far as we’re concerned,” Smolinski said. “We’ve asked that it be taken off our hands.”

Problems have been acute since the hospital quit active usage of the area in 1969. When buildings there were occupied, Smolinski said, the public stayed away and there were few problems. But without normal usage and the attendant security, he said, “people just came in and tore the place up.”

The Asylum Lake property is located north and east of the corner of Parkview and 12th Street in the city of Kalamazoo.

The lake is a popular winter ice fishing spot where anglers have walked in from several areas. There is no usage of the lake by boaters during the summer months, though boats for use by State Hospital employees and patients were on the lake when the area was being used by the hospital.
A recent tour of Asylum Lake’s north and east shores showed piles of litter, including beer cans, underclothes, paper and other debris all along the shoreline. Heavily eroded trails climb among the trees. Campfire sites are numerous.

And, on that day, the timbers of the Asylum Lake dock were ablaze in a heap on the shoreline, fired by State Hospital employees ordered to remove an “attractive nuisance” of the area.