Asylum Lake fight
How a battle over open space nearly stalled Kalamazoo’s economic engine.

By Julie Mack

It started as a favor, a plea from local leaders to Western Michigan University. The year was 1987. Business leaders, worried about the future of The Upjohn Co. and General Motors Corp., were anxious to diversify the local economy. Kalamazoo officials were anxious to boost their tax base, especially after voters rejected a city income-tax proposal. They dreamed up a new business park and had the perfect site – nearly 600 acres of WMU-owned property along Drake Road and Parkview Avenue, the city’s last large tract of undeveloped land.

In April 1990 WMU unveiled a plan for a business park with an incubation center and an emphasis on research and technology firms, which are generally considered cleaner than manufacturing facilities and, consequently, better to put near neighborhoods.

More than 300 acres would be developed on the former Colony Farm Orchard between Drake and U.S. 131 and the former Lee Baker Farm south of Parkview. The Asylum Lake property east of Drake and north of Parkview would remain open space.

The business community was thrilled; many neighborhood residents were livid.

“We were surprised by the depth of the opposition and how quickly it built,” said Edward Annen Jr., former Kalamazoo major and vice major. “It was the issue of open space and people saying, ‘We walk it, we hike it.’”

Today, 13 years later, the WMU Business Technology and Research Park is in place with six tenants and a business incubator expected to house a half dozen more on the former Lee Baker Farm. In addition, WMU this month will dedicate a new $99 million College of Engineering and Applied Sciences on the south end of the property.

The park is a linchpin for future job growth in Kalamazoo County, economic development officials say. Its importance has been magnified by an unnerving hemorrhage of jobs in the automotive, pharmaceutical, paper and financial industries.

In its prospects for creating jobs, the park is touted as a success story, a gleaming array of new buildings along U.S. 131 that officials hope is a harbinger of the county’s economic revitalization.

Yet there also remains some bitterness about the project — hard feelings that it took a wrenching, decade-long battle before the park was built, bitterness that the site is being developed at all.

Both sides offer the project’s contentious history as a cautionary tale. For project supporters, it’s about not-in-my-backyard activists blind to economic realities, hurting an entire community in the process. For critics, it’s about short-sighted government officials gobbling up pristine land and violating the public trust.

Former City Commissioner Curtis Haan was among those frustrated by the delay in getting the project off the ground.

“It put us 10 years behind the curve,” said Haan, who was on the commission in the early 1990s. “The country went through this big economic boom in the 1990’s and we missed out on that.”

Diether Haenicke, who retired as WMU president in 1998, said time has proven him and others right on the necessity for the business park.

“In 1987, we were the Cassandras predicting a future that would never happen” in terms of local job losses, he said. “Well, it happened.”

But there are people like city resident Robert Piellusch, who winces whenever he passes the new business park.

“I’m proud that we tried to stop the monster it’s become,” he said. “You can see
once WMU was allowed to go ahead, what they did. No more Walden Pond.

“It’s just another business park development. ... There’s brown-fields aplenty they could have used for that.”

Prelude to a tussle

From 1887 until the mid-1960s, Asylum Lake and Colony Farm Orchard north of Parkview served as a diary farm for the Kalamazoo Regional Psychiatric Hospital, giving the lake its name. The farm was phased out when it became cheaper to buy milk than produce it, and the dairy barns were torn down. The state deeded the Asylum Lake and Colony Farm Orchard property to WMU in the mid 1970s, although Michigan State University used the 54 acres west Drake Road for pesticide research from 1963 to 1988. Deed restrictions require that both pieces of property be used only for recreation.

The 265 acres south of Parkview were first settled in 1832, and it was said that Enoch Harris, Kalamazoo County’s first black settler, was among those who worked the land. The farm was eventually purchased by Lee Baker, a WMU agriculture professor who donated the property to the university in 1976.

Baker’s donation was unrestricted. That wasn’t true for Asylum Lake and Colony Farm Orchard, which are limited to “recreational or educational” uses and require legislative approval for any construction. Initially, that was fine with WMU, which allowed the 274-acre Asylum Lake property to be used for passive recreational uses such as swimming, hiking, and bird-watching.

“This is open space in the city of Kalamazoo that we hope can be left as open space,” William Kowalski, WMU assistant vice president for administration, said in 1979 about Asylum Lake.

That same year, Piellusch moved to Maryland and hung a photograph of Asylum Lake in his office.

“I would brag to people that I came from a city where there was a place like this inside the city limits, a place so natural it was like the Canadian Northwest,” said Piellusch, who moved back to Kalamazoo in 1980.

Still, Haenicke was receptive in 1987 when approached about the business-park plan. Although “a research park would do very little for the university,” Haenicke said, it would be WMU’s contribution to local economic development.

WMU gives in

The 1990 development project was endorsed by the WMU Board of Trustees, the Kalamazoo City Commission, the WMU Faculty Committee, the Kalamazoo Board of Realtors and the CEO Council, then Kalamazoo County’s economic development arm.

But opposition “grew rapidly. It was almost entirely from people living in Parkview Hills and the Oakwood-Winchell neighborhoods,” Annen said. They were a minority in the city, he said, but “a very vocal minority.”

“I think Western thought this would move rather smoothly,” said city resident Mark Hoffinan, one of the leading voices of opposition. “They miscalculated the reaction of surrounding residents.”

Dissenters included those who lobbied for residential development; those who accepted commercial development but feared park tenants would be too industrial; others who objected when a plan surfaced that included part of the Asylum Lake property.

Then-state Sen. Jack Welborn said the plan violated the deed restrictions for Asylum Lake and Colony Farm Orchard. The Kalamazoo Metropolitan Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People wanted to preserve Lee Baker Farm because of its link to local black history. Some adamantly opposed development of any sort.

Haenicke believed deeply in the need for the business park, especially after General Motors announced plans to close its Comstock Township plant. “We have to aggressively plan out future and influence it now before further catastrophe strikes,” Haenicke told the WMU board in 1993.

In theory, WMU didn’t need local approval for the business park, at least on Lee
Baker Farm. As a state institution, WMU did not even need zoning changes. As another option, the university could have sold the land to developers.

In reality, however, WMU was a public institution reliant on public good will – and the university was being pilloried at City Commission meetings, in letter to the editor in the Kalamazoo Gazette, and at neighborhood meetings, Haan said.

In May 1993, six weeks after WMU trustees agreed to proceed with Phase 1 construction, Haenicke abruptly pulled the plug on the project, citing a “climate of resistance and hostility.”

“He got tired of being beaten up by the neighborhood groups,” Haan said.

The CEO Council then took up the cause, getting permission from WMU to market the Lee Baker property to businesses, but the group ran into the same wall of opposition. In 1995, the CEO Council also dropped the fight. The next year, WMU put a soccer complex on Lee Baker Farm, and it was clear that opposition still existed to more widespread development.

Haenicke, who retired in 1998, said he’s still bitter about the resistance he faced. “I could not understand why a community in such economic distress didn’t want to be helped, and why a relatively small group ruled the day,” he said.

‘Have you ever seen a cobra fighting a mongoose? The cobra goes puff, puff, puff, and when it stops, the mongoose kills it. We were the cobra and Western was the mongoose. We were so pumped up and then we lost steam.’

Prafulla Mahanty
Parkview Avenue resident who fought development plans.

The tide turns

When Elson S. Floyd took over as WMU president in 1998, he immediately took a conciliatory approach.

He took down the brown and gold signs declaring Asylum Lake and surrounding properties reserved for university sports and recreational use. Neighbors regarded the signs as a move by WMU to underscore its rights to the property. Furthermore, they perceived the signs as an in-your-face move to diminish their rights to public open space.

Floyd pledged to hold public forums to get input on the properties.

“He got tired of being beaten up by the neighborhood groups,” said Prafulla Mahanty, a Parkview Avenue resident who fought development plans. “He played it very low key. He took the signs out … He was a very good politician.”

But Floyd also played a trump card, announcing plans to build a new WMU College of Engineering and Applied Sciences in conjunction with a business park. And he said keeping Asylum Lake as open space was critical to maintaining good community relationships. As for the engineering college, he said that was key to both increasing the university’s research profile and making the research park what it is today.

Forms in the business park must agree to collaborate with university programs. These collaborations could include research projects, internship opportunities for students, sponsored programs and recruitment of students for jobs.

The park “has been a success because the university did something fundamentally different,” Floyd said. “Usually research parks involve seeking private investment without public investment. So we turned it around and made a huge public investment and then invited private investment.

“That’s the key ingredient. People may have some issues with the cost, but for the economic spinoffs that will result, especially with what’s going on in Kalamazoo right now, it was absolutely the right thing to do.”

Barry Broome, chief executive officer of Southwest Michigan First, Kalamazoo County’s economic development agency, agreed that putting the engineering college at the park was a brilliant move.

“The engineering college makes the park,” Broome said. “If it wasn’t for the engineering school, it would just be another piece of dirt.”
Broome said both Haenicke and Floyd deserve credit for their roles in getting the research park developed.

"Diether was a major factor," Broome said. "Sometimes it takes 10 years and the people standing there at the end get the credit, but Diether deserves a tremendous amount of credit."

"What Elson did, in my opinion, he was a catalyst. He understood what it took to get the project off the dime."

Lingering emotions

The battles surrounding the nearly 600 acres haven’t completely evaporated. When the business park got its first tenant, Richard-Allen Scientific Co., residents angrily questioned whether the company would manufacture chemicals that would pollute the air.

A battle continues over putting in paved trails, boat launches and other recreational facilities at Asylum Lake or leaving the property alone. People like Mahanty still think the business park and new engineering campus were a big mistake and fear their neighborhood will be overrun by traffic once classes start at the WMU Parkview Campus, where 3,000 students are expected to attend classes daily.

But even the critics say they hope, now that it’s there, that the business park will be a success. Floyd, who said he “can’t take any credit” for getting the park built, believes the project is a success already.

"The BTR Park that we have in Kalamazoo is really one of a kind," Floyd said. "Very few have grown as fast as this one. It’s a huge success story, and I want Kalamazoo to get the recognition for it."
Robert Piellusch, left, and Mark Hoffman, longtime critics of Western Michigan University's business park, relax during a hike at Asylum Lake.
**Business park timeline**

**1987:** Kalamazoo city and business leaders ask Western Michigan University to develop a research and business park on university-owned land at Parkview Avenue and Drake Road.

**1990:** WMU unveils a proposal to develop the 265-acre Lee Baker Farm south of Parkview and 54-acre Colony Farm Orchard north of Parkview and east of Drake. The 274-acre Asylum Lake property would be left as open space. Development is strongly opposed by neighborhood residents.

**1991:** WMU trustees adopt development plan.

**1992:** Kalamazoo City Commission rejects call for citywide or neighborhood referendum on WMU plan.

**1993:** WMU trustees vote to begin business park construction. Opponents are furious, with one vowing “to take it all the way to the state Supreme Court if necessary.” Six weeks later, WMU President Diether Haenicke suspends project, citing a “climate of resistance and hostility.”

**1994:** The CEO Council, then Kalamazoo County’s chief economic development organization, obtains WMU’s permission to market the Lee Baker Farm property. Proposal meets stiff resistance from neighborhood and environmental groups.

**1995:** Kalamazoo City Commission rejects new zoning classification for business and research parks. CEO Council drops plans to market WMU property, citing "polarization" over project.

**1998:** Elson S. Floyd, WMU’s new president, says he’ll hold public forums on Lee Baker Farm and Asylum Lake properties, but also solicits Kalamazoo and Battle Creek for sites to put new College of Engineering and business park.

**1999:** Floyd announces engineering college and business park will be built on Lee Baker Farm. He pledges to keep Asylum Lake property as open space for passive recreation. Neighborhood and environmental groups applaud plan.

**2000:** Kalamazoo City Commission approves site plan for Richard-Allan Scientific, first tenant of the new business park. Citizens committee threatens lawsuit, saying Richard-Allan is a manufacturing plant and site plan is “legally defective.”

**2001:** Concerns over Richard-Allan development ease. WMU business park gets SmartZone designation from the state, allowing taxes generated to be used for park’s development, including marketing, infrastructure and park management.

**2002:** Richard-Allan opens $6.7 million facility, the first of the business park’s tenants. Today, the park has seven tenants who are operating or plan to locate in the park.

**2003:** WMU’s College of Engineering and Applied Sciences facility to open in late August. Wrangling continues over development of recreational facilities on Asylum Lake property, north of the WMU park.

SOURCE: Kalamazoo Gazette archives
Inside the park

Here is a listing of the businesses and projects at Western Michigan University's Business Technology and Research Park:

Engineering complex

1. College of Engineering and Applied Sciences, a 343,000-square-foot facility scheduled for completion in summer 2003.
2. Paper Coating Pilot Plant, a 50,000-square-foot facility scheduled to open Friday.

BTR Park tenants

1. Richard-Allen Scientific Inc., a 120,000-square-foot facility, opened in spring 2002 with about 140 employees.
3. Pro Line Tech Building, a 24,000-square-foot, multi-tenant facility. Tenants include Fishbeck, Thompson, Carr & Huber (since June 2002) with 20 employees; and NASCO Technologies Corp. (since December 2002) with at least five employees.
4. Granite Solutions, starting construction this month, scheduled to move into its building in 2004 with 30 employees.

6. Southwest Michigan Innovation Center, a 58,000-square-foot life-sciences incubator. It will become home to WMU's Biosciences Research and Commercialization Center. The project could utilize 25 percent of the Innovation Center. Up to seven companies led by teams of soon-to-be-displaced Pfizer scientists could absorb another 50 percent of the facility. The balance could be occupied by other projects that have been housed temporarily in WMU's McCracken Hall such as Actives International, which extracts active ingredients from plants for the cosmetic and pharmaceutical industry.