WMU BTR PARK: GAZETTE’S HISTORY WAS INACCURATE

Viewpoint written for the Kalamazoo Gazette by Mark A. Hoffman, August 18, 2003.

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Julie Mack’s selective history of the Business, Technology, and Research (BTR) Park in the August 9, 2003 Kalamazoo Gazette should not be the final version of its inception in 1990. I would like to outline some of the article’s omissions and errors.

1. Dr. Lee Baker did not donate to WMU the 257-acre farmland south of Parkview Avenue that recently bore his name. The former State Hospital farmland was conveyed to Western by the legislature in 1959 (Public Act 269) at a time that, for various reasons (cost, liability, machinery, competition, etc.) institutional farming in Michigan was being phased out. Dr. Baker was hired by WMU and became Chair of the University’s now-disbanded Agriculture Department. During his tenure at the University, the Baker family lived in Western’s historic house on the Parkview farm. Following his untimely death in 1982, the WMU Board of Trustees dedicated the farmland in Lee Baker’s honor (October, 1983).

2. The initial plan for a University-sponsored Research Park (1990-93) called for building an industrial park in an area that, even today, is clearly unsuitable for this type of development. WMU’s consultants, Hammer, Siler, George, Associates (HSGA) emphasized in two feasibility studies the importance of creating a manufacturing and distribution center to compete locally and with Battle Creek’s Industrial Park at Fort Custer. The consultants further stated: “Research activity and research jobs are thus an important aspect of the park development effort and image, but, in fact, a relatively small part of the total development activity” (HSGA, 1990, p. 6). And for three years, debate over developing an industrial park on WMU properties at Drake Road and Parkview Avenue would focus on the following issues: environmental concerns, compatibility with adjacent residential properties, probability of success from other research parks, traffic and logistics, deed restrictions, zoning and referendum, and impacts to the area’s quality of life.

3. The Gazette failed to mention the Asylum Lake Preservation Association (ALPA), which formed in December, 1990 to protect the integrity of the area. ALPA requested the City Commission (April 27, 1992) to approve a Research Park design based on standards and restrictions that were modeled after other university-sponsored Research Parks – most notably, Research Triangle Park in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. ALPA’s alternative plan called for a “Research-only Park” to be built south of Parkview Avenue, and would ultimately be characteristic of the BTR Park that is envisioned today. The ALPA proposal was endorsed by numerous local organizations including all adjacent city neighborhood associations, and WMU’s site planners devoted significant analysis to the proposal in their development-summary report. Unlike Western’s Park plan, the ALPA proposal did not call for building on the restricted Colony Farm Orchard; nor did ALPA redesign Parkview Avenue to rob 30 acres (over 10-percent) from the restricted Asylum Lake property.

When WMU and local leaders would not accept a scaled-back version of the Research Park, ALPA sought to protect deed restrictions on the two properties north of Parkview Avenue. The August 9 Gazette never mentions the all-important 1993 legislation proposed (by Rep. Dale Shugars) to change the Orchard’s open space restrictions, allowing WMU’s Research Park to serve a “public purpose” on that tract of land. Shugars’ committee in the House of Representatives supported his bill, and the entire House voted to pass the legislation. However, the same bill later considered by the Senate would finally receive a full and fair committee hearing.

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The result of the Senate committee action, which essentially killed Shugars’ House bill, was pivotal in the history of the first Research Park attempt. Sentiments among Senate committee members for refusing to change restrictions on the land north of Parkview Avenue (Research Park, Phase 1) were best expressed by Senator John Pridnia (R - Hubbard Lake) who said that he would prefer to sell the property at a fair-market appraisal sale, and he concluded by saying: “...that when day is done, and the doors are locked on the ‘for-profit’ operation, the keys to the front door will remain in the pocket of the CEO when he or she goes home. Therefore it is not a public building.” Even though a Gazette reporter attended this dramatic committee hearing, the newspaper merely reports today that WMU President Diether Haenicke cancelled the first proposal in May 1993 because of “a climate of resistance and hostility.”

4. Michigan State University retains a research-interest in the Colony Farm Orchard property, even though the Gazette article suggests that they only used it from 1963 to 1988. The 1977 transfer legislation (Public Act 158) contains a clause that authorizes MSU to use the Orchard for its research endeavors. MSU still uses the land, as was apparent in the June, 2000 lease revisions.

Ms. Mack begins her historical report on the WMU BTR Park by stating that, “a battle over open space nearly stalled Kalamazoo’s economic engine.” However, the issue is much more complex than simply a fight to save greenspace. While the former powers-that-be continue to scratch their heads, wondering why the initial Research Park proposal was met with so much opposition, it is important to thoroughly understand the objections that were at the center of debate from 1990-93 (industry, deed restrictions, etc.). These reasons should also shed light on the public’s skittishness toward a second Research Park proposal (1994-95) which was also scrapped.

Since the early Research Park proposals, WMU has increasingly pursued applied academic research. The fact that Western lacked this status in the early 1990s was well-noted by the University’s consultants (HSGA) in their Market Analysis for the Research Park. But times and circumstances have changed. Efforts by local leaders to suppress our shaky economy, and WMU’s entry into the world of applied research during the late-1990s should favorably influence development in the new BTR Park. Nonetheless, Western’s Research Park has a 13-year, multifaceted history. While we should celebrate its recent successes, let us also correctly recount the lessons learned from its initial trials.

Mark Hoffman is a life-long resident of Kalamazoo who helped to form ALPA in December 1990. He was the group’s President from 1990 - 1993.