

Asylum Lake future secured

WMU president reassures Kalamazoo in letter that property will remain open



Elson Floyd

BY ED FINNERTY
KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Western Michigan University's president hopes to put to rest concerns that Asylum Lake will be used for anything much beyond bird-watching and leisurely walks in the wild.

Elson Floyd sent a letter to Kalamazoo Mayor Robert Jones on Friday committing to develop the 274 rolling acres of woods, wetlands, prairie and fields

in southwest Kalamazoo for walking, running, cross country skiing and other forms of passive recreation.

"It makes a lot of sense to go ahead and be clear how we plan to use Asylum Lake," Floyd said shortly after sending the letter off to City Hall.

"There seems to be this belief that someone, the university, wants to place large buildings on Asylum Lake. That's clearly not our intent and it seemed appropriate to just clarify with the public

that we plan to use it as a passive recreational facility, with community input involved in that."

WMU will retain ownership and control of the property, but in conjunction with "community leaders" it will develop a master plan for its passive recreational development, to be funded by a \$1.5 million endowment administered by the Kalamazoo Foundation.

The endowment and passive Asylum Lake uses were part of a successful \$20

million proposal the city made to persuade WMU to build its new engineering campus and research park on the adjacent Lee Baker Farm.

In announcing its choice of Kalamazoo over Battle Creek for the project two weeks ago, WMU didn't explicitly accept the city's proposal, approving the site "subject to appropriate rezoning and the acceptable definition of Asy-

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lum Lake boundaries and governing control."

Floyd's letter comes three days before the City Commission will consider rezoning part of the Lee Baker Farm to allow the private development portion.

Jones said Floyd's assurances on Asylum Lake's use should tie up an important loose end for many people.

"There are quite a few people out there that from past history don't fully trust Western, don't fully trust the city," Jones said.

"I think that lack of trust is why we had to make it clear," he said of Asylum Lake's future.

Asylum Lake has been as sensitive politically as environmentally over the last decade. The property has been the focal point of often rancorous debate on whether WMU's 593 acres of holdings off Parkview Avenue should be developed or preserved. Two previous proposals to develop a research and business park on parts of Lee Baker Farm, Asylum Lake and the 54-acre Colony Farm Orchard failed under the weight of heavy controversy.

Deed restrictions limit uses of the Asylum Lake property to recreation and open space, though WMU could ask the state Legislature to drop the restrictions. Last year, WMU studied developing a golf course, which it believed would have fit under the deed restrictions.

Floyd hopes the community sees WMU's commitment to preserve the Asylum Lake property as proof it doesn't intend to return to those days.

"Clearly, it is consistent with the spirit of what we would like to be as an institution, but more importantly what I think will be good for us as a community," he said.

Amy DeShon, president of the Asylum Lake Preservation Association, said ALPA had heard earlier this week that a commitment by WMU to preserve Asylum Lake may be in the works.

"I think this is really fantastic," she said. "We have to give thanks that this really happened and that generations that come after us will have this park on the west side," she said.

DeShon said ALPA, the chief opponent to WMU's previous development plans for the area, will hold an emergency meeting today to reconsider its position opposing the Lee Baker Farm rezoning.

ALPA has opposed the rezoning largely over concerns about the extent of manufacturing or production allowed under a proposed new business, technology and research zoning district.

Robert Beam, WMU's vice president for business and finance, will lead a team of people, including "community leaders," charged with developing the Asylum Lake master plan. Floyd did not define who the community leaders involved would be, but said the group will take wide community input.

"I would imagine all of the groups that would have a particular interest would be involved," Jones said.

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