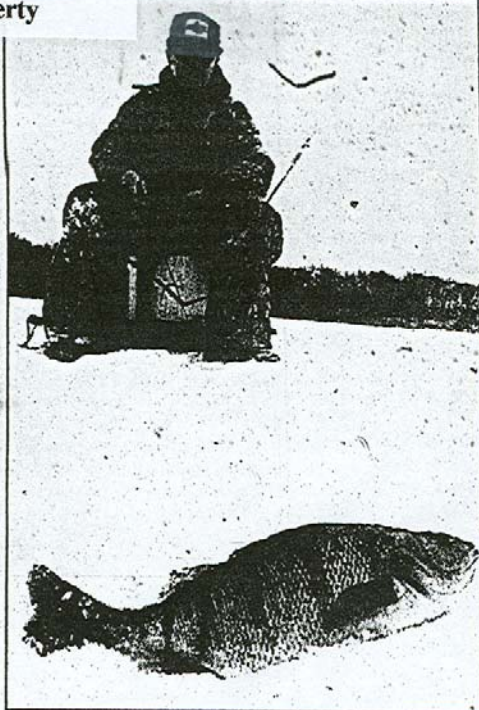


Feb 24, 2003
Kalamazoo Gazette
By Ed Finnerty



Dick Liskovec ice-fishes on Asylum Lake, which is part of an undeveloped 274-acre site on the city's southwest side.

MARK BIALEK /
SPECIAL TO THE
GAZETTE

New tug of war over Asylum Lake

*City, focus group at odds
over how much to develop
recreational property.*

BY ED FINNERTY
KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

A citizens' group and Kalamazoo city officials have clashed over how best to protect and improve Western Michigan University's environmentally and politically sensitive Asylum Lake preserve.

Four years after WMU announced intentions to permanently preserve the 274 acres of prairie, woods, wetlands and lake

on the city's southwest side, major philosophical differences have stalled an agreement that would govern its use.

The city has proposed substantial changes to a conservation easement drafted by the Asylum Lake Focus Group, composed largely of citizens with environmental interests. The city revisions would allow new buildings, paved trails and parking lots, lighting, bicycles, rowboats and other uses the focus group has sought to ban on the property off Drake Road and Parkview Avenue.

Please see **ASYLUM, A4**

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ASYLUM

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"We thought it would be pretty much fine-tuning minor things, then the city came back with a

whole set of dramatic changes," said focus group member Ken Dahlberg, a retired WMU professor. "From the focus group's perspective, it's not their (the city's) role at all to propose major changes."

Deed restrictions the state placed on the property upon giving it to WMU in 1975 limit its uses to "public park, recreation or open space purposes." Among the few large, undeveloped tracts left in Kalamazoo, it has been closely guarded by environmental and neighborhood groups. There are dirt paths and a small public parking lot off Drake, but the property is otherwise unimproved.

In February 1999, former WMU President Elson Floyd announced intentions to permanently protect the Asylum Lake property, including efforts to reduce and reverse environmental degradation and develop passive recreational uses. The university pledged to work with the community on protective covenants and a master plan for the property.

A 20-member Asylum Lake Focus Group was charged with working out details of the conservation easement, which the city is charged with enforcing.

The city committed \$200,000 and the Kalamazoo Community Foundation \$1.3 million toward an endowment to fund the preserve's development for passive recreation and its maintenance. The endowment was part of a \$20 million incentive package WMU accepted to build its engineering campus and Business, Technology and Research Park on the Lee Baker Farm adjacent to Asylum Lake, rather than in Battle Creek.

"If we are going to put public dollars into something, we need to make sure the general public can gain access to the site," City Manager Pat DiGiovanni said.

The city has proposed a paved drive and parking lot that can accommodate school buses, a research/education center, canoe launch and overlook on Asylum Lake, bike paths connecting to nearby neighborhoods and WMU campus, a native-plants garden and large areas for restoration of native prairie grasses and oak savanna.

"Nothing in our proposal as far as I know degrades the quality of this land," DiGiovanni said.

Focus group members disagree. They support prairie and oak savanna restoration, but argue that paved parking lots and trails and other elements of the city proposal will damage the environment.

"The property is pretty sensitive to high levels of activity, particularly activities that impact on wildlife and water quality," Dahlberg said. "What the city is proposing would really threaten (those)."

"We wanted to encourage people to go in there, but we didn't want to turn it into another Kalamazoo Nature Center," said Fred Sitkins, who chairs the focus group. "We would rather have that be a natural area where people can enjoy the prairie grasses, the critters ... not to turn it into a nature center with paved parking lots."

The property originally was mostly oak savanna, and the focus group has been trying to "restore it to some sort of a pristine condition," Sitkins said.

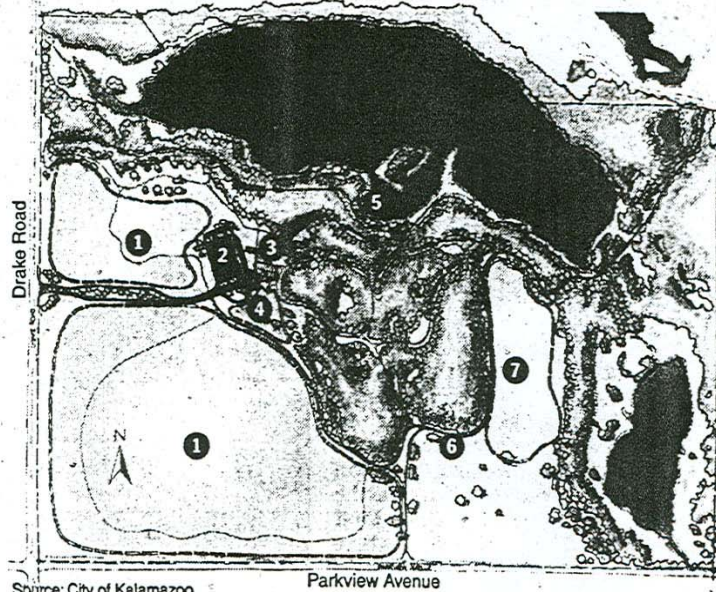
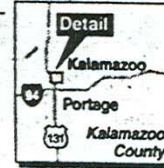
"This is still the university's property," said Sitkins, a WMU engineering professor. "The university can't be spending state money intended for education for a park for the city of Kalamazoo."

"I am not trying to get another park out of this at the university's expense," DiGiovanni countered.

"We understand the sensitivity of

Asylum Lake development proposed

The city of Kalamazoo has proposed paved parking and trails, a research/education center, canoe launch and other changes for the Asylum Lake property off Parkview Avenue and Drake Road. An Asylum Lake Focus Group that has been working years on plans for preserving the WMU-owned property opposes such extensive development.



Source: City of Kalamazoo

- 1 Prairie restoration
- 2 Parking for buses and cars
- 3 Research/education center
- 4 Native plants garden
- 5 Canoe launch and overlook
- 6 Bike/pedestrian connection to:
 - Winchell Elementary School
 - Winchell neighborhood
 - WMU campus.
- 7 Oak savannah restoration

KRIS KINKADE / GAZETTE

the focus group but we think natural preservation can coexist with passive recreation," he said. "I don't think the uses we propose are in conflict with that."

"Walking and biking and canoeing, I think, in most reasonable people's minds, are passive recreation."

WMU Vice President for Business and Finance Robert Beam said the university hasn't taken sides.

"We have difference of opinion on the appropriate uses of the property," he said. "We're still working between the city and focus group on accommodating both sides' interests."

"I don't see it as creating a park on our dime, so to speak," Beam said of the city's proposal.

WMU's finance chief said it is unlikely, however, that the university will fund buildings, parking lots or infrastructure on the preserve. "Western is not in the business of building and operating public parks," he said.

The Asylum Lake endowment administered by the Kalamazoo Community Foundation currently has no investment earnings available to spend on the preserve, because of declining financial markets. The principal in the fund cannot be

spent.

In response to the city's proposal, the Asylum Lake Focus Group recently sent City Hall a proposed conservation easement almost identical to its previous version. It includes no provisions for a research-and-education center, paved trails or parking lots, or a canoe launch.

"I think the city is going to have to come up with a proposal that is more in line with what the committee has proposed," Sitkins said.

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