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By Pat Zarkowski

Asylum Lake cleanup urged in WMU report

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Kalamazoo's "Walden Pond" — the 274-acre Asylum Lake property north of Parkview Avenue and east of Drake Road — offers a unique opportunity to meld economic development and environmental sensitivity, a review committee says.

Western Michigan University's research and business park proposed at the site could enhance the area's natural features while eliminating long-standing contamination problems on the Asylum Lake property, according to a report issued by a WMU Faculty Senate committee.

The Asylum Lake property is not part of the planned 319-acre business park, but the report says it should be incorporated into a master plan for all 600 WMU-owned acres in the area.

The Faculty Senate committee

recommends development of the business park if strict development, environmental and monitoring controls are in place.

The committee said the Asylum Lake property should be permanently designated as open space for public use. City officials have suggested that an independent group, perhaps the Kalamazoo Nature Center, could assume control of the property.

The possibility of having tenants of the park pay an annual fee to help preserve the Asylum Lake property also has been discussed by a Kalamazoo City Commission task force monitoring the project. However, that proposal was not examined by the Faculty Senate committee.

The Asylum Lake property is not "untouched, pristine wilderness area," the report said, noting the grounds once housed a state mental institution and was used

for agriculture. But echoing neighborhood sentiments, the committee says the land should be preserved and maintained.

"Sanitary sewer and storm systems constructed for the project could be designed and located to eliminate current contamination of Asylum Lake resulting from sanitary effluent and storm water runoff," the report said.

"Careful planning and designation of environmentally sensitive areas of the site as open space could also preserve most of the natural woodlands and wildlife habitat in the project area."

Design and construction methods could ensure that on-site storm water runoff from the project does not contribute to the contamination of ground water, the report said.

"The university's entire holdings in the area should be treated holistically as a larger ecosystem that

THE COMMITTEE'S VIEW:

- Establish a task force of community, neighborhood and environmental leaders to work with Western Michigan University in developing a master plan for all 600 WMU-owned acres in the area.

- Require the park to meet the highest design, development and environmental standards.

- Prohibit heavy industrial, wholesale, warehouse and distribution facilities and strip malls in the park. Some light manufacturing may be permitted if the development meets strict controls for vehicle traffic and air, water and noise emissions, among other requirements.

- Conduct a comprehensive environmental assessment of the area, including the 274-acre Asylum Lake property.

- Permanently designate the Asylum Lake property as open space for public use.

- Do not establish a Foreign Trade Zone.

- To ease congestion on Parkview Avenue, widen Drake Road from Stadium Drive south to Parkview, and extend Drake Road from Parkview south over U.S. 131 to 12th Street in Oshtemo Township.

contains natural environmental elements and economical, social and public improvement components," the report states.

Work toward preservation and enhancement of the project area should begin with an extensive environmental assessment.

Even without development of

the business park, residential development on the 257-acre Lee Baker Farm south of Parkview Avenue in the project area could cause environmental problems, the report said.

The Lee Baker Farm could hold more than 1,000 single-family units, according to city zoning.

- Prohibit truck traffic on Parkview east of the business park site. Explore installation of center turn lanes and timed signal lights to improve traffic flow on Parkview in residential areas. However, general widening of Parkview in those areas should not occur.

- Widen Parkview to a four-lane boulevard near the park site west to Drake Road if necessary. Preservation of trees is essential.

- Use private contributions, public tax dollars and financing mechanisms such as Tax Increment Financing to pay for road and sewer improvements. Under TIF, property-tax revenue generated from new park development could be used to pay for the capital projects.

- Preserve most of the vegetation and trees. The farmhouse on the University Farm south of Parkview could be restored and moved to the Asylum Lake property and serve as an interpretive center to chronicle the area's history.

- Establish new local zoning to regulate permitted uses for a business park in addition to formulating development covenants and design guidelines for the facility.

"However, by embracing the objectives of the proposed research and business park, and the planning techniques (recommended) ... the community could have significantly greater control over the quality of the environment and impacts of development on the area," the report said.

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