

Asylum group softens stance, but still can't support proposal

Citizens' group wants to prohibit manufacturing and guarantee permanent preservation of lake property.

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The Asylum Lake Preservation Association will oppose development on the Lee Baker Farm unless two criteria are met, President Amy DeShon said.

The city must prohibit manufacturing and also guarantee that the adjacent Asylum Lake property will be forever preserved from development.

The group's executive committee approved the position, which is a softening of its stance held for the past several years, DeShon said. She noted the group welcomes development by Western Michigan University, even spinoff research and cer-

tain "prototype" production - as long as Asylum Lake is preserved.

"It is a major shift," DeShon said of the group being open to private development on the 265-acre Lee Baker Farm. "It's primarily due to the fact that we have this really nice carrot" with a proposed \$1.5 million bond to preserve 274-acre Asylum Lake.

However, she said, the group wants a written guarantee that Asylum Lake will be preserved "in perpetuity" as part of any development on Lee Baker Farm.

The group's full membership will vote on the position Tuesday. "I do not expect a different outcome at all," DeShon said.

The city is trying to lure WMU's College of Engineering and Applied Sciences to the property at the corner of Drake Road and Parkview Avenue in the city's southwest corner. WMU already owns both the Asylum Lake and Lee Baker Farm proper-

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ties, but needs to get a zoning change to allow for private development.

Western is also looking at sites in Battle Creek for the engineering college, which brings the prospect of on-site spinoff businesses and job growth.

To help WMU and the city, DiGiovanni said, the property needs to have "some light manufacturing type of business to augment some of the work the university is doing so that we're building some commerce here. We've said that publicly, and otherwise there really is no reason to do what we're doing."

At the core of the issue is a proposed zoning ordinance that would govern what types of uses would be allowed on the property. The sticking point is how the city will define "production" or "light manufacturing."

The city said from the start that manufacturing from raw materials won't be allowed. That's not strict enough, residents and others have said.

"They could almost build a car there under that rule," DeShon said.

Pollution and traffic, especially trucks, have been key concerns.

The city's Planning Commission took public comments on the proposed zoning ordinance Thursday and intends to vote on it at a special meeting next Wednesday. The City Commission would then have to approve the new zoning ordinance, called the Business, Technology and

Research District.

DiGiovanni said it's the city's intent to preserve Asylum Lake in perpetuity under the proposal.

"But we haven't gotten down to that (detail with WMU) because right now we're at the first step of the process, not the last step," he said.

Two main reasons have softened ALPA's opposition to private development on Lee Baker Farm, said Cal Mastin, former group president and still a member of its executive committee.

The city has pledged to preserve Asylum Lake and WMU would be an occupant at the business and research park.

"They will also have a real concern about what kind of neighbors they have," he said.

Mastin said the city is making efforts to revise the proposed zoning ordinance, but so far it hasn't been enough.

"Prototype development is fine," he said. "If they want to do major manufacturing, there are other sites."

"The devil's in the details."

DiGiovanni stressed: "We're not building an industrial park here."

WMU President Elson Floyd is expected to make his recommendation this month on whether the engineering college should be moved to Lee Baker Farm or Battle Creek.

"I hope that . . . we can all step up to the plate and look at things from a different perspective, and look at the total picture," Mayor Robert B. Jones said in reference to ALPA. "And make sure we understand that it is the total picture that is important, as well as all the various individual parts."