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By P.N. Todd

Planners Discuss Future Of Asylum Lake Area

With a few caustic words about government secrecy, the Kalamazoo Metropolitan County Planning Commission has called for state and local governments to get together on the future of the Asylum Lake area in western Kalamazoo and eastern Oshkemo Township.

The commission, at its regular monthly session Thursday, told County Planning Director Bruce Watts to try to set up two discussion meetings:

- With the Kalamazoo City Planning Commission, preferably at a noon luncheon on Aug. 21.

- With everyone involved, including township, Michigan National Guard, Western Michigan University, state Department of Mental Health, and city officials, at a public session in early September.

The State Department of Mental Health administers the now - controversial land east and west of 12th Street, also called Colony Farm Road for the Kalamazoo State Hospital rural unit which existed there until several years ago.

The state owns all the frontage on Asylum Lake, which is about the



size of Woods Lake with a somewhat larger area of adjacent marsh. There is no public access by road, though neighborhood children, students and fishermen frequently walk in to the lake.

Western Michigan University owns land to the south of Parkview Avenue.

With the phaseout of patient care by the state hospital, other public agencies have been eyeing the 400 acres of so, now the largest chunk of undeveloped public land in the city or on its boundaries.

The City of Kalamazoo has wanted the lake frontage, at least, for a park for many years. But the Department of Mental Health, says

City Planning Director Bruce Brown, "doesn't want to commit the land until they're sure what they want to do with the rest of it."

The state only owns frontage about 20 feet deep on the lake, Brown said. The land between that frontage and Stadium Drive is owned by the McMartin family and persons who married into it. To Brown's knowledge, the private owners have never been approached, although "I would certainly think we would be interested in exploring it."

The Michigan National Guard is expected to acquire land west of U.S. 131, and south of Parkview Avenue, from WMU for a new armory site to replace the downtown Kalamazoo armory.

The Kalamazoo State Hospital has been looking for a site for a new children's unit.

Michigan State University, Kalamazoo city officials have indicated, is to acquire some land west of 12th Street for agricultural experiment purposes.

Besides that, the Kalamazoo City Planning Department has been

dickering with the Michigan State Housing Development Authority about possibilities of a "new town" project on the Department of Mental Health - owned land between Asylum Lake and Parkview Avenue, and between 12th Street and U.S. 131.

At the moment, says Planning Director Brown, the idea is dormant because the mental health officials won't release the land.

What Brown had envisioned, if the idea worked out, was a residential community on the land south of Asylum Lake, which is more or less level, and some light industry on the adjacent land between the freeway and 12th Street to provide jobs for those in the residences.

The county planners mainly want everybody involved to get together instead of going off in all directions.

They're annoyed, especially, that state officials apparently decided on the new armory site without telling anybody in local government.

In a resolution last month, the county planners urged "that a reexamination of the development

potential of state owned land in the vicinity of 12th Street and Parkview Avenue be conducted jointly by the appropriate city, county and state authorities, with particular attention given to its possible use for open space purposes."

That last phrase recalls the open space study conducted for the county by Robert O'Boyle Associates of Parchment, which strongly recommended that the county acquire the Asylum Lake property for open space purposes.

However, the proposed millage to support the proposed land acquisition was defeated by county voters by a narrow margin, and the state owned land on the lake has not been available anyway.

Thursday, Oshkemo Township Supervisor Kenneth Nederveit called the approach to locating the armory "not very good planning," though he said the township board was "not that opposed" to the proposal.

County Planning Director Watts said a National Guard official, who said the guard couldn't afford to buy land for a new armory and so

took what was given, agreed with Watts that "A free site is a very poor criterion for building an armory."

County Planning Com. Myron Ross said that "I find it odd that this (plans for the land, especially the discussion of a housing project) has been suppressed." A candidate for the city commission, Jerry Ballard, has nearly accused that body of planning public housing for some of the state owned land in the Parkview - 12th area.

But Brown has said that's not so — that the Housing Development Authority would help financially with a project which would have some apartments set aside specifically for tenants qualifying for rent subsidies.

Brown was willing to discuss the exploration of the "new town" project with news media several months ago, but only on a "not for publication" basis because nothing was firm at that time.

Since that time, however, there has been publicity about the National Guard plans, and apparently some word about the possible housing project leaked out to Ballard.

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