

City drops plans for Asylum Lake

Preservation decisions left in hands of university, volunteer committee

BY ED FINNERTY
KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

The city of Kalamazoo has bowed out of a conflict over how best to preserve and improve Western Michigan University's sensitive Asylum Lake property, leaving it to university officials and a volunteer committee to decide.

A city administration proposal to put paved trails and parking lots, a boat launch, educational center and other development on the 274-acre property off Drake Road and Parkview Avenue was dropped Monday when the City

Commission voted 4-3 to end city involvement. The decision, following a sometimes heated 2 1/2-hour discussion, angered environmentalists, who have clashed with city administrators over preserving the land.

The rolling, wooded terrain with prairie, wetland and two lakes in southwestern Kalamazoo was deeded to WMU by the state in 1975 with restrictions that it be used only for passive recreation. In 1998, the city agreed to contribute \$200,000 toward a \$1.5-million community

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ASYLUM

From Page A1

endowment to maintain the property. The money was part of the effort to persuade Western to build its engineering college and Business, Technology and Research Park on the adjacent Lee Baker Farm.

WMU established a 20-member focus group that has worked more than four years to develop permitted uses of the property and plans for reversing environmental degradation. It proposed a conservation easement that the city would sign as the body enforcing protective covenants for the property.

The city countered with its own proposal for more intensive recreational uses on the property that focus group members argued would ruin its ecosystems and are beyond the city's scope to dictate.

Robert Beam, WMU vice president for business and finance, did not take a definitive side as the City Commission considered the issue in a special work session Monday, but said he thought WMU "could abide by" the focus group's recommendations. He said that Western officials were surprised by the city's proposal and that the university "did not intend to run a park" on the property.

"We never proposed a park. Never," responded City Manager Pat DiGiovanni, who called the focus group's vision for the property "too restrictive" for him to support.

DiGiovanni said the issue boiled

down to "a simple disagreement about ... what is passive recreation." He said the city could still "honor the deal" it made to WMU by putting up the full \$200,000 it pledged to the Asylum Lake endowment and accepting whatever uses WMU and the focus group develop for the property.

Mayor Robert Jones, Vice Mayor Hannah McKinney and commissioners Al Heilman and Mary Balkema voted to cut city involvement, aside from paying the last \$80,000 it owes toward the endowment. Commissioners Sean McCann, Don Cooney and Linda Teeter voted against the move.

"I think this is the best way to keep it focused on a preserve, to get us out," said McKinney, who made the motion. She is concerned by the growing mistrust by focus group members and others of the city's motivations.

"I think we have an agreement to fulfill," Teeter countered. "I think it's the easy way out."

Focus group members expressed disappointment with the commission's decision.

Amy DeShon, president of the Asylum Lake Preservation Association, called it a "travesty" that the city would abandon the conservation easement the focus group proposed. She said the association agreed not to oppose WMU's development of the Lee Baker Farm on the understanding the city would help adopt protections for Asylum Lake.

"I think they made a big mistake," Mark Hoffman, a focus group

member who chairs the city Planning Commission, said of city commissioners. "The city has effectively cut themselves out of any future enforcement" of covenants to protect the property, he said.

Without the city as the enforcing body, it is unlikely a conservation easement will be adopted with a different enforcing partner, WMU's Beam said, though he did not rule it out. The land is already protected to a great extent by legislation that deeded the property to Western, he said.

"I don't think anything particularly is going to change at Asylum Lake as a result of this," he said of Monday's action.

Beam said he would consult on Western's next step with President Judith Bailey, whose first day on the job was Monday. "Very frankly, President Bailey has yet to see any of this," Beam said.

"What a horrible discussion to be having the first day someone comes in as a new university president," Teeter said, expressing dismay that the issue had become so contentious and dragged on for so long.

Teeter and McCann lobbied unsuccessfully to delay Monday's decision until a future regular commission meeting, to allow more discussion. The commission normally doesn't decide issues at work sessions, but City Attorney Robert Cinabro said it has no rule against acting at such meetings.

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