

New WMU park plans encroach on Asylum Lake

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■ Details of plans, C1

Two of three preliminary designs for Western Michigan University's proposed business and research park on Kalamazoo's southwest side call for developing a parcel of the environmentally sensitive Asylum Lake property.

University officials have repeatedly insisted this land would not be part of the development area.

A third proposal leaves intact the Asylum Lake property, located at the northeast intersection of Drake Road and Parkview Avenue, and would entail development of substantially less acreage.

Richard T. Burke, vice president of regional education and economic development at WMU, said a site analysis completed in December caused the university officials to rethink their original plans.

Burke emphasized, however, that none of the three proposals is final. He said the public will have a chance to comment at public forums this summer.

"We have not reached a conclusion on any of these," Burke said. "Frankly, a lot of work needs to be done. For the press to begin to report on what people are saying begins to limit discussion."

But while the designs are

only preliminary, some residents believe WMU is reversing its earlier position that the Asylum Lake property would never be developed.

"The fact is, originally, we were promised by Western that they wouldn't touch that area and they have gone back on their promise," said Renay Piercey, a member of the Parkview Hills Community Association, made up of property owners in the residential area immediately east of the project.

"Once they've broken their promise, what's to stop them from breaking it even further?"

The Asylum Lake property, at Drake Road and Parkview Avenue, is made up of corn fields, rolling meadows, woods and wetlands. The university owns the land but the public has been permitted to use it for such activities as walking and running.

The business and research park is to consist largely of research and development firms, high-tech businesses, offices and some light manufacturing.

Publicly, university officials had discussed only developing areas across the street from Asylum Lake: the 54-acre Colony Farm Orchard, west of

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Drake Road; and the 265-acre Lee Baker Farm, south of Parkview Avenue. Those parcels and the Asylum Lake property, which is owned by the university, totals nearly 600 acres.

Now, two of the three preliminary designs call for developing approximately 40 to 60 acres of the 274-acre Asylum Lake property, according to James A. Visser, WMU's assistant vice president of regional education and economic development. He said the development would be limited to the corn fields.

Under both plans, an arc-shaped roadway would cut through the lake property.

At its closest point, the proposed roadway would be about one-quarter mile away from Asylum Lake, said David Krueger, director of the Kalamazoo Area

Transportation Study, the area's regional transportation agency. At a typical point, it would be about four-tenths of a mile from the lake, Krueger said.

"It is out of the lake basin and the wetlands," Krueger said, referring to the road.

Visser said the university began considering using a portion of the Asylum Lake site after a site analysis conducted by the Kalamazoo landscape architectural firms of O'Boyle, Cowell, Blalock & Associates and Larry L. Harris Associates.

The study indicated that the university ought to build on land that is or was farmed, regardless of whether that land falls on the Asylum Lake property, Visser said.

"The land planners, who did the site analysis, came back to us and said, 'The

way the three parcels are . . . run counter to the true environmental character of the land and so . . . why don't you let the land speak to you about what should be developed and what should be preserved,'" Visser said.

"So in the next phase of planning, they came up with two conceptual alternatives that followed the natural character of the land, rather than the legal boundaries."

Burke concurred. "When you design something that is environmentally sensitive, let the land speak to you," Burke said. "When you walk it, there are undulations. It tells you there are things you should do, and there's things you shouldn't do."

For example, all of the 265-acre Lee Baker Farm originally was to be included in the business-research park.

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Now, two of the three proposals call for leaving the hilly, wooded areas on the southern and eastern ends of the farm as open space, Burke said, thus serving as a natural buffer between the project and the adjacent Parkview Hills housing development, which is made up of rental units and homes.

But even with these concessions, the Asylum Lake Preservation Association recently sought a neighborhood-wide referendum on the business and research park. The request was rejected by Kalamazoo city commissioners in a 5-0 vote.

WMU's third proposal for the park was submitted by the Asylum Lake Preservation Association. This plan proposes to develop 120 acres compared to the other two proposals calling for 290 acres.

The 120-acre proposal "doesn't require

any alteration of Parkview Avenue and Drake Road and it also won't allow the development of the Colony Farm Orchard and the Asylum Lake parcel," said Mark Hoffman, Asylum Lake association president.

"They can't prove this thing will be a success. That's why I think it would be more appropriate to start off with a small parcel first."

Hoffman said basic questions still must be answered. "Where are they going to come up with the money for the infrastructure — the roads and the sewer? It's going to come from the city's pocket-book."

The preliminary road proposals do not include cost estimates. But university officials say construction could begin as early as spring of 1993.

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