

## New nature preserve proposed

*Property near Asylum Lake, owned by Western Michigan University, is focus of group's request*

By Barbara Walters  
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A proposal to turn Kalamazoo's Asylum Lake area into a history and nature preserve will be unveiled at a public meeting tonight.

Called the Genesee Preserve Project, the preserve would be located on 593 acres owned by Western Michigan University at Parkview Avenue and Drake Road.

Project organizers include some members of the Kalamazoo Metropolitan Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The project would involve the Asylum Lake area, totaling 274 acres, Lee Baker Farm, 265 acres, and the Colony Farm Orchard, 54 acres. Western and the Kalamazoo County CEO Council had unsuccessfully proposed to turn the Lee Baker Farm into a business and research park.

The project proposes:

- Restoring the Lee Baker site from farmland to its natural prairie grasslands that could be used by WMU and other educational institutions for research and education. Biking and hiking trails, similar to Portage's Celery Flats Project, would be added.
- Restoring the Gibbs farmhouse, the white Greek revival home which still stands on Parkview on the Lee Baker Farm, to museum quality and make it available for public tours.
- Constructing an interpretive center to tell the story of the Native Americans

who lived on the prairie and the settlers who followed them.

John Houdek, an associate professor of history at WMU, has served as a university liaison to the project, said Kalamazoo NAACP President Viola Gaines-McMillon, a member of the Genesee board of directors.

Houdek said he and Molly Cole, program coordinator of WMU's environmental studies program, are scheduled to meet with WMU President Diether Haenicke about the project on March 21.

"His reaction to using it for university research and educational purposes has been very positive," said Houdek, who first met with Haenicke about the project about a year ago. "(He is) open to exploring it."

The Kalamazoo Gazette was unable to reach Haenicke for comment today.

Keith Pretty, vice president for external affairs and general counsel for WMU, said he was not aware of the proposal and that Haenicke had not discussed it with him.

Genesee organizers said there have not been any formal discussions with university officials.

*'The Lee Baker Farm is the largest undeveloped tract of prairie land left in the city of Kalamazoo.'* Jean DeMott  
Kalamazoo NAACP

However, there have been some informal talks within the university about using the Asylum Lake area for environmental studies. Cole said she has met with representatives from about 11 academic departments and other interested parties at WMU who support designating the Asylum Lake area a

“field station” for environmental research.

In addition, the WMU group wants to create a central body to coordinate those efforts, she said. “There are departments that have been using Asylum Lake for research,” Cole said. “But there’s been no coordinating body.”

The departments have drafted a one-page statement of its mission and guidelines, which will be presented to Haenicke, Cole said. The general public would still have access to the area for hiking and other purposes, she said.

The statement says the project “will support and enhance the academic programs at WMU by providing a site for field studies, research and community outreach in the natural sciences along with other compatible uses.”

In an introduction to The Genesee Preserve Project proposal, Jaan DeMott, head of the communications committee of the Kalamazoo NAACP branch, writes, “The Lee Baker Farm is the largest undeveloped tract of prairie land left in the city of Kalamazoo and its history dates to the earliest settlement of Kalamazoo County.”

Gaines McMillon said she spoke informally about the project to Haenicke last summer, and said Genesee board members are in the process of contacting WMU trustees to gain their support for the proposal.

The original settlers on the Lee Baker Farm, located south of Parkview Avenue and east of U.S. 131, were Enoch Harris and his wife, Deborah, who are credited with planting the first apple orchard in the area, according to DeMott.

The Harris family were also among the first black settlers in the county and were the ancestors of Duane Roberts, Kalamazoo’s most renowned civil rights activist who led the flight here to desegregate the public schools.

Roberts died in 1983, his sister, Barbara, is on the Genesee project board, according to Gaines-McMillon.

Gaines-McMillon said the Genesee board sees the interpretive facility as “a holistic center” that would pay tribute to many cultures.

She said the National Park Service has expressed an interest in the project because of its proximity to the “underground railroad.”

*Gazette Staff Writer, Earlene McMichael contributed to this story*