

# WMU planning soccer complex in Asylum Lake area

*Group favoring nature preserve says it will still pursue alternate plan.*

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GRAND RAPIDS — Western Michigan University will put a soccer complex on property it owns in Kalamazoo's Asylum Lake area.

WMU President Diether Haenicke said Friday after a WMU Board of Trustees meeting in Grand Rapids the property will be used for future university growth, starting with a competitive soccer field and a practice field for the

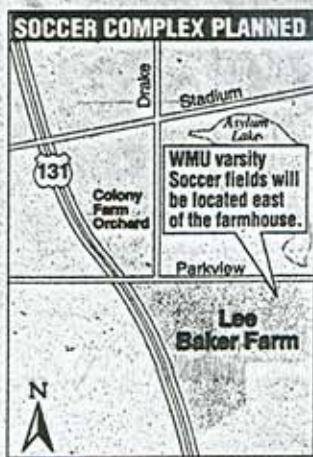
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varsity soccer program it is launching this fall.

But a group that favors turning the area into a nature preserve and historical center says it will still pursue its plans despite the board's decision.

The property had been targeted for development of a business and research park. That idea was abandoned last summer because of public opposition.

A resolution approved by the



trustees Friday stated that WMU "has no intention to divest itself of these properties (Lee Baker Farm, Asylum Lake and Colony Farm Orchard). ... Western Michigan University does not intend to participate in the proposed Genesee Preserve Project."

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## COMPLEX

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The Genesee project would turn the 593 acres of the three properties into a nature preserve for science research, restore the area's prairie grasslands and create an interpretive center to recognize Native Americans and black settlers.

It is supported, in part, by some members of the Kalamazoo Metropolitan Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Jean DeMott and Viola Gaines-McMillon of the NAACP were at the board meeting to explain the project to trustees.

"I'm not surprised (by the board action)," Gaines-McMillon said. "The community needs to be on board. Like anything else, we the people will make the decision."

"We move forward," DeMott said. "This just helps us set our parameters."

The university plans to build a 27,000-square-foot competitive soccer field and a practice area of about 67,500 square feet to the east of the farmhouse, said Greg Dobson, the president's aide. The outdoor facilities will be open only to WMU teams, he said.

Haenicke said he could not comment on the Genesee proposal because "I cannot comment on

something I have not seen."

But, he pointed out, the Asylum Lake area is the last open land the university has, and "the board is entrusted to make the best use of the land and the best use for us is to hold it specifically for university use."

Western "will hold the land exclusively for uses that are directly and closely related to the academic mission and future growth of the university's own teaching, research and recreational programs," the board resolution said.

Gaines-McMillon said groups in the community have been working for 18 months to develop the preserve project and Haenicke knew of their efforts.

"I told Diether, 'You have to think about the vision for the university,'" she said. "I told him to think about how many departments can use the land (for research) and about the regional nature of the project."

DeMott and Gaines-McMillon said they will continue to try to generate public support for the preserve. The next meeting of preserve project organizers will be at 7 p.m. April 11 at the Disciples of Christ Church, 2208 Winchell.

They said they intend to contact U.S. Rep. Fred Upton, R-St. Joseph, to try to persuade him to tie the site into the National Parks Service because of its connection to the Underground Railroad.