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By Earlene McMichael

Group challenged WMU's park plans

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"A small but extremely vocal group." In Western Michigan University's 10-page statement Saturday announcing the suspension of its research and business park project, an unnamed "small but extremely vocal group" was criticized for "distorting" WMU's message and creating a "climate of resistance and hostility" to the park.

WMU officials won't say whether the Asylum Lake Preservation Association was part of that group.

"It's no secret that WMU officials have been exasperated with Asylum Lake Association members, who publicly challenged the university's arguments, often citing document after document.

"I would like to think public officials we've dealt with along the way appreciate that we use facts and figures, (and not) emotion," ALPA President Mark Hoffman said Tuesday.

Hoffman said his group is not as stubborn and intractable as some may be-

lieve. While ALPA did take a hard-nosed "no research park" stand initially, he said, that stand had softened by summer of 1991 to pushing for a scaled-down version of the park project.

Hoffman insists a compromise with WMU officials could have been reached.

Development had been planned for 260 of about 600 acres WMU owns at the intersection of Drake and Parkview on Kalamazoo's southwest side.

The most controversial development was of the 54-acre Colony Farm Orchard northwest of Drake and Parkview and about 30 acres of the 274-acre Asylum Lake property northeast of the intersection.

ALPA favored building a 165-acre park on the 265-acre Lee Baker Farm property located south of Parkview Avenue and

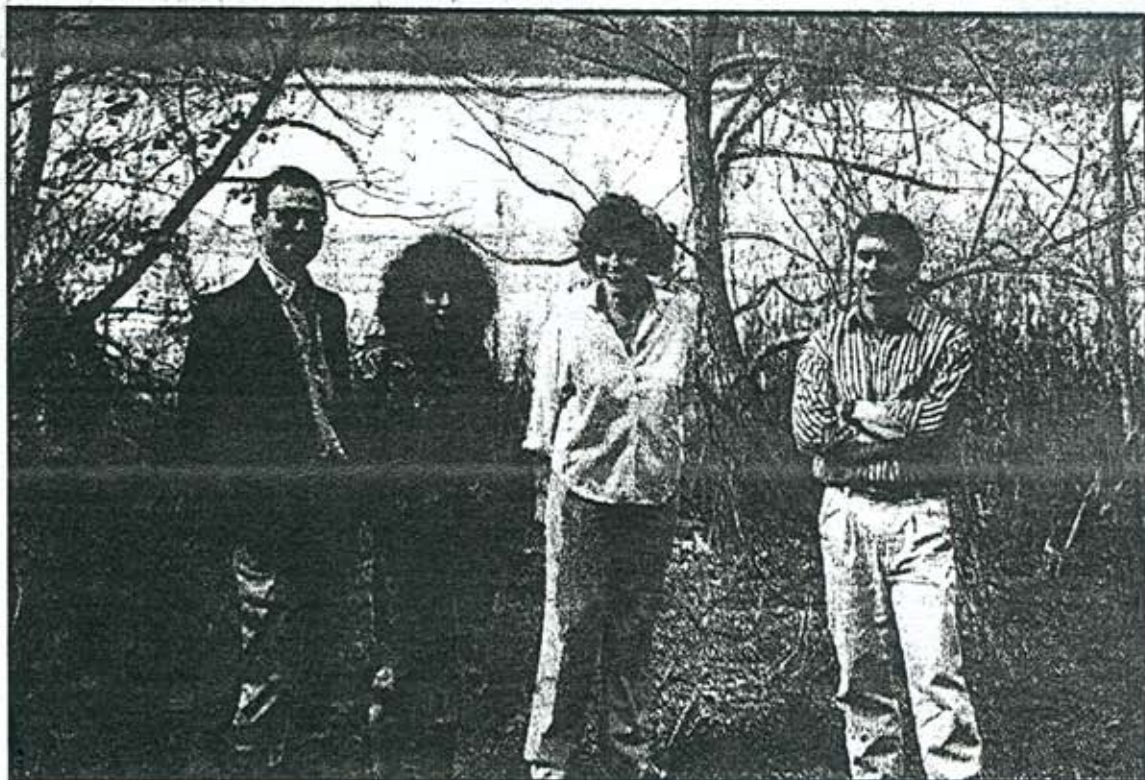
Asylum Lake.

According to Hoffman, where the university and the ALPA finally clashed was over the 54-acre Colony Orchard Farm in Oshtemo Township, where initial park development was slated.

Key legislation affecting first-phase development is pending in the state Legislature. WMU officials had sought ALPA's cooperation on the legislation. ALPA, Hoffman said, was willing to accept a research park, but not on the Colony Farm Orchard.

Consequently, on April 22, ALPA members and others spoke out against the research park legislation during a state hearing.

That same day, a senate committee indefinitely postponed action on the legislation, which had been unanimously approved by the state House. Approval by the committee was necessary for the full Senate to vote on the bill.



GAZETTE PHOTO / JERRY CAMPBELL

Executive board members of the Asylum Lake Preservation Association include, from left, Montford Piercey, Renay Piercey, Harriet Waskowsky and Mark Hoffman. Not pictured are Thomas Miller, Patricia Klein, Robert Nagler and Marianne Vos.

On Saturday, WMU suspended the park project.

Hoffman blames the project's demise on WMU officials' "poor public relations" and "lack of spirit of cooperation" with community organizations. Many times, Hoffman said, he has had to invoke the federal Freedom of Information Act to get documents, for a fee, from WMU.

"I think, quite honestly, if the university had worked with the community... and responded to concerns early on, that resistance and hostility could have been minimized," Hoffman said.

The university painted a different picture in its 10-page statement.

"We can not overstate the extent to which we have involved the public and interested groups in the planning and development of this project," it said.

But, according to Hoffman, the

skepticism about the park project spanned the neighborhood associations, the Senate Committee and community and campus environmental organizations and countless others, not just ALPA.

Consequently, Hoffman said he is puzzled by WMU's phrase, "small but extremely vocal group."

Since its founding in December 1990, ALPA's membership has grown from roughly 20 to 230 members — hardly "small," Hoffman said.

But why does Hoffman, who also holds a full-time job, devote as much as 30 hours a week to this cause?

Hoffman, 30, who does data processing, payroll and programming for a Kalamazoo Township firm, lives near the Miwood neighborhood — nowhere near the park project.

When Hoffman first learned in

spring of 1990 that WMU was considering building a research park near Asylum Lake, he became alarmed about the possibility of losing the lake he had been swimming in for about 10 years. Soon, he became versed in the state legislation deeding the Asylum Lake and Colony Farm Orchard properties to WMU and its various restrictions and became a frequent panelist at neighborhood park forums.

At an Oakwood Neighborhood Association meeting in November 1990, he met Renay and Montford Piercey, homeowners in Kalamazoo's Parkview Hills neighborhood immediately east of the planned park development. The couple suggested a coalition be formed, Hoffman said.

"None of us knew what research parks were all about," recalled Hoffman of the early days. "(But) we became experts."

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