

Kalamazoo conservationists fight university's latest plan to develop natural area

WMU needs legislative OK to strip conservation restrictions

Conservationists are fighting—again—to stop Western Michigan University from stripping conservation protections from and developing a tract of woodlands.

The Colony Farm Orchard in Osh-temo Township is a narrow, 54-acre tract of wooded open space and one of three contiguous properties in Kalamazoo that were the site of an extensive farming operation for the Kalamazoo State Hospital from 1888 to 1959.

As the properties were deemed surplus by the Michigan Department of Mental Health, they were trans-

ferred individually to Western Michigan University. Public Act 158 (section 3) of 1977 conveys the Orchard to WMU but restricts the use of the property “solely for public park, recreation, or open space purposes, except that the legislature, by statute, may authorize Western Michigan University to utilize the property for some other public purpose.” The legislation also permits Michigan State University’s Department of Entomology to continue its use of the Orchard for research.

To the east of the Orchard is the 274-acre Asylum Lake property. It

was conveyed to WMU by the State of Michigan in 1975 with the identical restrictive language used to transfer the Orchard. To the south is the former Lee Baker Farm, 257 acres transferred to WMU in 1959 without restrictions.

WMU announced in April 1990 that it would begin developing the properties. The Asylum Lake Preservation Association (ALPA) and the Kalamazoo Environmental Council (KEC) united with neighborhoods and community leaders in Kalamazoo and Oshtemo Township to protect the three properties from the business and industrial development that WMU was proposing. The KEC, at that time, believed that it was important for Western to “hold and maintain parcels of land containing natural ecosystems for purposes of research and instruction.” WMU withdrew its plan in May 1993 after it failed to convince a Senate committee that private/for-profit businesses constituted a “public purpose,” as stipulated in the 1977 conveyance legislation.

The Asylum Lake property, with its two connected lakes, hiking trails and prairie restorations, was further restricted by WMU Trustees in April 2004 by the adoption of a management framework and additional guidelines that designated it as a “preserve.” This was the result of a compromise with the Kalamazoo community in 1999 to generate support for the Business,



Conservationists believe water quality would be compromised with more development on the Asylum Lake property.

Technology, and Research (BTR) Park and School of Engineering that was built on the Lee Baker Farm. A \$1.5 million endowment was also established in 1999 to provide for the maintenance of the Asylum Lake Preserve.

WMU's Board of Trustees, on July 2, 2009, approved an agreement with MSU for the termination of its lease and authorized expenditures, not to exceed \$985,000, to relocate the

research. WMU is now seeking to have the Michigan Legislature eliminate the restrictions to enable the expansion of the BTR Park into the Orchard. House Bill 5207 was introduced July 16, 2009, by State Representative Robert Jones of Kalamazoo.

ALPA believes that developing this tract will pose a serious risk to the watershed and sensitive ecosystems of the neighboring Asylum Lake Pre-

serve and decrease the protection of the preserve from the impact of the high traffic volumes on US-131 west of the Orchard.

ALPA requests that others voice their objections to House Bill 5207 by letting state legislators know that the Colony Farm Orchard in Oshtemo Township and the Asylum Lake Preserve in Kalamazoo need to be protected.

—Provided by the *Asylum Lake Preservation Association*



This area is home to native wildlife and plants, which help absorb stormwater to reduce flooding and protect water quality.