Privately financed $6 million course is a 'great plan,' administrator says

By Mickey Ciokajlo

Western Michigan University has architectural drawings for a golf course on its Asylum Lake property but any decision to build it would be made by the next administration, outgoing President Diether Haenicke said Thursday.

"I think it's a good idea, it's a great plan," Haenicke told the Kalamazoo Gazette Editorial Board.

Renowned golf-course architect Arthur Hills of Toledo last year drew up plans for a $6 million, 18-hole course that would include the 270-acre Asylum Lake property and the adjacent 54-acre Colony Farm Orchard. The properties are located on Kalamazoo's southwest side near the intersection of Parkview Avenue and Drake Road.

Western's future use of the land has generated considerable interest, particularly after the university's failed effort in the early 1990s to build a research and business park in the area.

Deed restrictions limit the use of the properties to recreation and open space. A golf course would meet those guidelines, Haenicke said.

The course's construction would be funded with private donations, he said.

"Somebody would have to say, 'Let's go build a golf course,'" said Haenicke, who retires July 31. "I would imagine the next
president, and the board and the foundation would raise the money, so quite a few people would have to come together.

The course may have some public access but would be primarily used by students, alumni and employees. Western this fall is adding a women's golf team that would use the course, he said.

Haenicke said several other universities statewide have courses and, along with the recreational aspect, they are excellent venues for fund-raising.

The university has recently erected several large yellow signs in the Lee Baker Farm and Asylum Lake areas proclaiming the land's use for sports and recreation.

"We put big signs up so that it sinks in and people move away from the concept it's their front yard," Haenicke said.

Haenicke said modern golf courses can be designed and used in environmentally friendly manners, eliminating concerns about fertilizer runoff draining into Asylum Lake.

The university would need to mitigate any environmental impact on the lake if the course was built, said Montford Piercey, a former Kalamazoo city commissioner and past president of the Asylum Lake Preservation Association.

"My concern is the effects on the waterways," Piercey said. "That is an important issue."

Haenicke does not play golf but has been told the property could be turned into a nice course. "The terrain with the lake and the surrounding area ... simply has golf course written all over it," he said.

The plan shows the course cutting close to the lake and incorporating the water into its design, WMU spokesman Matt Kurz said.

Western's plans are not tied to preliminary city discussions of possibly removing Red Arrow Golf Course from its Kalamazoo River frontage on the other side of town. Planning Commission Chairwoman Nuria Stockman said.

"There was no link that way," said Stockman, adding she had heard rumors about Western looking at the Asylum Lake land for a golf course. "It's completely on the other side of town and would serve a different population."

Using the Red Arrow Golf Course property for commercial and residential development has been discussed during meetings to update the city's Comprehensive Plan. The plan has been yet been approved.

Haenicke said a university-owned golf course at Asylum Lake would not compete with privately run courses, which developer Joe Gesmundo, part owner of The Moors of Portage, was pleased to hear. "I just think for a public institution like the university to put in a golf course with state money and then go out and compete and perhaps hurt private-sector people, perhaps would not be fair," Gesmundo said.

Gesmundo is a member of an informal Kalamazoo River study group that first raised the idea of moving the Red Arrow Golf Course and opening up the river-front property to the public and possible development. He also said talks have not involved any connection between the university course at Asylum Lake and possible movement of the city-owned Red Arrow links.

Haenicke called the year-old, preliminary $6 million price tag for the university course "doable."

"We have a nice layout how it would be," he said. "Then we have done a very quick and informal study on how much it would cost to develop that."

"And so it is something that is on the table as, you know, labeled 'possible future prospect,' ... We could fund it with private funds without using any state or student tuition funds, so I think it has a very attractive ring to it."