Planners Discuss Future Of Asylum Lake Area

With a few caustic words about government secrecy, the Kalamazoo Metropolitan County Planning Commission has called for state and local governments to get together on the future of the Asylum Lake area in western Kalamazoo and eastern Osceola Township.

The commission, at its regular monthly session Thursday, told County Planning Director Bruce Watts to try to set up two discussion meetings:
- With the Kalamazoo City Planning Commission, presumably at a noon lunchea on Aug. 21.
- With everyone involved, including township, Michigan University's state Department of Mental Health, and city officials, at a public session in early September.

The State Department of Mental Health administers the now-controversial lidded east and west of 2nd Street, also called Colony Farm Road for the Kalamazoo State Hospital rural unit which existed there until several years ago. The state owns all the frontage on Asylum Lake, which is about the size of Woods Lake with a somewhat larger area of adjacent marsh. There is no public access on road, though neighborhood children, students and fishermen frequently walk in the lake.

Western Michigan University owns land to the south of Parkview Avenue. The Michigan National Guard is expected to acquire land west of U.S. 131, and south of Parkview Avenue, from WMU for a new armory site to replace the downtown Kalamazoo armory.

The Kalamazoo State Hospital has been looking for a site for a new children's unit. Michigan University, Kalamazoo city officials have indicated, is to acquire some land west of 2nd Street for agricultural experiment purposes.

Besides that, the Kalamazoo City Planning Department has been honoring with the Michigan State Housing Development Authority about possibilities of a "new town" project on the site of the Mental Health Hospital property, between 2nd Street and U.S. 131.

At the moment, says Planning Director Brown, the idea is dormant, but the mental health officials won't release the land.

What Brown had envisioned, if the idea worked out, was a residential community on the land south of Asylum Lake, which is more less level, and some light industry on the adjacent land between the freeway and 2nd Street to provide jobs for those in the residences.

The county planners mainly want everybody involved to get together instead of going off in all directions. They're annoyed, especially, that state officials apparently decided on the new armory site without telling anybody in local government.

In a resolution last month, the county planners urged "that a reexamination of the development potential of state owned land in the vicinity of 2nd Street and Parkview Avenue be conducted jointly by the appropriate city, county and state authorities, with particular attention given to its possible use for open space purposes."

That last phrase recalls the open space study conducted for the county by Robert O'Kelle & Associates of Kalamazoo, which strongly recommended that the county acquire the Asylum property or open space purposes.

However, the proposed millage to support the proposed land acquisitions was defeated by county voters by a narrow margin, and the state owned land on the lake has not been available anyway.

Brown was willing to discuss the exploration of the "new town" project with new media several months ago, but only on a "not for publication" basis because nothing was firm at that time.

Since that time, however, there has been publicity about the National Guard plan, and apparently some word about the possible housing project leaked to Ballard.