At Public Meeting

Asylum Lake Use As Park Supported

By P.N. Todd

State land at Asylum Lake should become a public park, and remain mostly in its natural state.

That appeared to be the consensus of a public discussion Wednesday night at Kalamazoo City Hall on the determination of the state hospital property south of Stadium Drive.

About 30 persons attended.

They included the entire Kalamazoo area legislative delegation: Sen. John Welborn and Reps. Wayne Sackett and Howard Wolper.

Welborn has introduced Senate Bill 1843, with several other senators representing southwestern Michigan, to authorize lease of the 30 acres of lake frontage and 40 land to Kalamazoo County at 10 a year for park recreation and access only.

He and Wolper said they'll try to pass the bill through this legislative session, but added that it may have to wait for the next session.

Access to obtain the land for park use followed Kalamazoo State Hospital determination that the land, which includes all frontage on Asylum Lake and about half the frontage on Little Asylum Lake to the southwest, was "surplus" to its needs.

State hospital officials, neighbors and city officials have been unhappy about littering, nude swimming and destruction of vegetation by motorcycles since FES phased out patient care in buildings near the lake.

"Mrs. Jane Copeland," 1325 N. Church and Michael Don of 513 W. Lowell, who moderated Wednesday's session at Kalamazoo City Hall, are among those who were spearheading support for Welborn's bill and a natural park treatment.

They're circulating petitions in support of the park, and are seeking persons willing to give a "continuous" effort, who are invited to call Mrs. Copeland at 349-4190.

"County Parks and Recreation Director Donald Kelley supported a natural treatment, if the land becomes a county park.

His agency's philosophy, "Returning the natural resource tract of land, allowing 100 acres or more to eliminate conflicts among users, and between users and abutting private landowners," "controlled" access by a single park entrance, and emphasis on recreation which visitors can enjoy at their leisure, rather than "structured" programs such as softball leagues.

Ralph Smith said he and Robert Vermue, both 222 S. 12th, own most of the abutting land, find Welborn's bill "an excellent idea." Their principal concern, he said, is that persons trespassing on their land, thinking it's state-owned.

County Commissioner Jack Hunt said he doesn't want a park on the lake to be an "amusement park," and prefers "passive" recreation.

County Board Chairman Robert Welborn, whose district includes the lake area, said: "We want to protect the land and make sure our children and grandchildren have more open space left."

Sen. Welborn, brother of the county board chairman, emphasized that "The fact that the bill has been introduced does not open this area up to public use. It's off limits, really."

Dell said that virtually all trails leading to the lake cross private land. The 12th Street entrance gate is frequently locked by state hospital personnel to minimize vandalism.

Sen. Welborn said his bill proposes a lease of the land because that's the fastest way to create a local park.

Passage of a bill giving the land away would be extremely difficult, he said, and normally, the state would sell land for its appraised value.

Another change may well be the name of the lake.

The McMartin family, of which Smith and Vermue are members, once owned much of the land in that area, and the lake was McMartin. Lake. Mrs. Copeland says that same family is on the maps.

Vermuelen took the same hunt back, a step farther, suggesting that the Lorenzo family, owners of the land before the McMartins, and the water was known even earlier as Lorenzo Lake.

"The name of the lake may well be what the public calls it," Sen. Welborn after many phone calls to state officials, he was unable to find how a lake's name can be officially changed.