

Tough Times

In the 1960s the atmosphere began to change, not just in West Park, but across the nation. Agitation for equal opportunity brought cultural upheaval in many forms. Young people especially became anti-establishment and rejecting of their parents' world of social norms and conformity. Some dove into radical political activity; some became part of the drug scene, using marijuana or more potent drugs; large numbers turned to new ways of dress, thought, speech, and sexual behavior.

While the counterculture was developing and blossoming, West Park's immediate neighborhood was developing in a different direction. The Older Americans Act, part of President Johnson's Great Society, fueled interest in better services for senior citizens. High rise buildings for senior citizens came on the scene. Lurie Terrace, a residence for active seniors of moderate means, was built 1963-65 as two eight-story towers up on the bluff on the southern border of West Park. About five years later, on the bluff on the northern border of West Park, facing the Band Shell, seven-story 106-unit Miller Manor appeared. As public housing built by the Ann Arbor Housing Commission (AAHC) in 1971, when it opened it exclusively housed elderly residents.

In the 1960s and 70s, counterculture young people were attending protests and rock concerts, some right there in West Park, surrounded by high rise buildings filled with senior citizen residents. The volume of the concerts mushroomed in terms size of crowds, rowdiness, and loudness of the music. Social tensions grew, and clashes over events in West Park grew with them.

The desires of the youth and the desires of older citizens did not mesh well with regard to rock concerts at the Band Shell. In the late 1960s the loudness of the amplified rock music, the seeming disrespect for the American flag, and the obscenities at loud volume were bones of contention., especially when iconic bands like the Grateful Dead or the Motor City 5 (MC5) played. With extensive discussions in city council and in the press, eventually what worked out was to shift large loud concerts away from high-residential areas such as West Park and to low-residential places in the city such as Gallop Park. The abrasive counterculture approach calmed following the end in 1975 to the Vietnam War, which had been the focus of widespread protests.

In the late 1960s and into the 1970s there were conflicts on another front as well. – clashes between police and youth. An example of this type of conflict occurred in August 1970. Citing incidents of crime and vandalism in the West Park area as the prompting events, the city administrator announced increased policing and supervision for the park. In addition to regular Parks and Recreation Department staff at the park, there would be a Police Department sergeant, two patrolmen and up to six counselors, plus two uniformed beat patrolmen walking the area at night and a lieutenant assigned to investigate complaints.

Recognizing that the low level of availability of summer jobs that year was a contributing factor to the crime and vandalism, another step taken was to convert the West Park Shelter into a type of community center. Following less than a week after the announcement of increased policing, a disturbance occurred in West Park that prompted the formation of Blacks United for Liberation and Justice (BLUJ) protesting police treatment, accusing the police of acting improperly. Seeking solutions to the police-youth conflict, the BLUJ presented to city council a list of demands, including suspension of police officers, the dropping of charges against black youths arrested, and formation of a police review board.

Mentally Disturbed Now Homeless The 1970s and 1980s saw a development of a different nature that would have a strong impact on West Park and the nation as a whole – a tidal wave of a movement away from psychiatric institutions as a means of treating the mentally ill. Deinstitutionalization fervor caught hold.

Communities were increasingly being faced with mentally ill persons with no place to go. This would have strong consequences for Miller Manor and West Park. Due to an amendment in 1988 to Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968--prohibiting housing discrimination on the basis of disability and family status--Miller Manor began accepting tenants with physical, mental, and/or substance abuse issues. Designed to provide housing for independent seniors, [Miller Manor began experiencing problem of criminal activity.](#)

Shortly thereafter, the state of Michigan made further and far-reaching reductions in state care for the mentally disturbed. The 1990s escalated the trend of hospital downsizing and closing, as the state sought to

move patients from expensive hospitals into community-based support systems and halfway houses thought to be a more therapeutic approach to mental disorders.

Among the ultimate outcomes was massive homelessness of mentally disturbed persons in Michigan's communities, with struggling people sleeping in public places, including parks, including West Park. Drugs also became increasingly problematic. This also took a toll at Miller Manor in terms of criminal activity.

Safety Concerns Safety was a concern even in the early years of West Park, as these snip-its suggest:

"Moved and Carried that no one be allowed in West Park after 9 P. M. and that a sign stating the same be placed at the entrance to the Park." – Board of Parks minutes, August 18, 1914

"Gentlemen: I [George Bischoff] have to call the attention of your honorable body to the fact that the fence along the north and east side of West Park, which adjoins my garden, is not kept up as promised and specified in the deeds when the land was sold to the City for park purposes I must therefore insist that the committee in charge will see to it that this is corrected as I cannot allow any more trespassing on the grounds. I also must insist that no more balls are allowed to fly over my greenhouse and garden, and that boys in hunting for them tramp on and ruin plants. I trust that this be given your kind and immediate attention and no more complaints or other steps made necessary. Referred to Park Committee." – Common Council minutes, April 26, 1915

By the mid-1940s liquor in West Park was an issue. "The law against the sale of intoxicants to minors is a sound law; it should be soundly enforced." 1]

Safety concerns mounted with time, growing loud in the mid-1960s and reaching a crescendo at the beginning of the 1990s. The situation at Miller Manor and general problems of widespread homelessness, of drug use, and of reduced state funding for services, including education, rippled out to impact the organized youth activities at West Park. [During the early 1990s the summer recreation and winter ice-skating programs were phased out](#) as cost-cutting measures for tight budgets, because parents were scheduling their children's activities more in other summer programs, and because parents had safety concerns about sending their children on their own to the park. With skating and summer programs canceled, there were large chunks of time with no organized activities going on in the park. As the park became emptier of people, problems grew. Police patrols were increased, and the shelter was eventually torn down.

It was around this time that rangers became a feature in West Park, as this November 1, 1993 article attests:

Ann Arbor News archives courtesy of OldNews. AADL.org

By 1990 West Park had degenerated into one of the worst areas in the city's park system. "It had become a meeting place where homeless people and drifters

took drugs, drank alcohol and harassed visitors." But "Today it's a pretty nice place." The change was due to neighbors and city officials, including ex-Mayor Liz Brater, targeting the area for change. Ranger Stevenson, age 46, played a major role in the cleanup, adding to his duties of providing information and keeping the peace, the service of talking to potential trouble-makers "up in trees, behind dumpsters and in alleys" -- starting a conversation with a simple hello and showing them respect. He said because he empathizes with their plight, drifters and the homeless tend to trust him and listen to his suggestions about where they could get help.

West Park has undertaken a variety of changes over the years to better address the public safety challenges of homelessness, drug or alcohol abuse, or harassment of park visitors – ubiquitous problems for city parks in

modern times. Among the measures taken are land purchases adding a better view into the park from the streets surrounding it. In 1983 a parcel of land fronting on Miller Avenue broadened the open span near the Pergola. In 2009 a parcel fronting on Chapin Street broadened the view into the park near the entrance there once the house was removed. Community gardens as part of Project Grow were added in the 2010 renovations. The gardens better assure the presence of park visitors with a commitment to caring for the park. Ties to the community have also been strengthened in a variety of creative ways such as art in public spaces and working with a volunteer landscaper doing numerous plantings experimenting with how well they will grow. By 2015, [Miller Manor underwent substantial changes](#) to better accommodate recently homeless or chronically homeless tenants, and that helped improve the situation for West Park as well.

Health Concerns: Dioxane from Gelman Plume A major health problem for the Ann Arbor area is the underground plume of dioxane that leached into groundwater at the Gelman Sciences complex off Wagner Road between the 1960s and 1980s. The company once used dioxane as an industrial solvent in its process of manufacturing medical filters. Among other health risks, dioxane is EPA-classified as a likely carcinogen by all routes of exposure.)

The plume of dioxane has been gradually spreading through Ann Arbor's and Scio Township's groundwater for many decades. West Park has played a variety of roles over the years in efforts directed toward cleaning this up. In October 1994 West Park was the site of a rally intended to drum up support for a special tax millage on Scio Township's November ballot to pay for environmental consultants and lawyers. In February 2002, West Park along with Miller Park, was a location where Pall Corporation (who acquired Gelman Sciences in 1997; Danaher Corporation subsequently acquired Pall Corporation in 2015) drilled test wells to measure presence of dioxane in the groundwater. These wells were among more than 200 drilled by that time in the Ann Arbor and Scio Township areas. In February 2019 West Park was one of seven locations along Ann Arbor's Allen Creek storm drain system to have samples collected for lab analysis. [At that time the plume had already been shown to cover an area more than three miles long and a mile wide, inching toward the Huron River](#) -- the source of Ann Arbor's drinking water. In 2022, testing and litigation is still on-going in efforts to clean up the Gelman Plume.

Note

1. 'Law Against Selling Liquor to Minors;', Ann Arbor News, July 1, 1946.