



The Saugatuck Dunes &

The Kalamazoo River Mouth

- ▲ Public Parks & Beaches
- △ Conservation Easements
- - - Original Denison Tract
- Historic Sites

One of the rare features of this beautiful stretch of lakeshore is that most of the dunes remain in their natural state. With the exception of some scattered cottages and houses, large tracts of pristine dunes endure. The future use of this land will have a significant impact on the character of this rich natural and cultural resource.



Map by Mark Cook

TIMELINE

The Former Denison Lands, Public Acquisition Efforts, and McClendon/Saugatuck LLC

Protection of the Saugatuck Dunes stretching from Oval Beach to the Saugatuck Dunes State Park is a clearly defined economic strategy spanning fifty years. Supporters include The National Park Service, Former Governor William Milliken, The West Michigan Strategic Alliance, the City of Saugatuck, and thousands of individuals.

In 2004, ignoring the statewide effort to create a park linking Oval Beach to Saugatuck Dunes State Park, attorney Stephen Neumer, working for Oklahoma billionaire Aubrey McClendon, begins an aggressive campaign under the name of Saugatuck LLC to buy and develop our exquisite fresh water sand dunes.

Check our website for more detail and updates.

- 1957** The National Park Service cites protection of the Saugatuck Dunes as essential to meet the recreation demands of the region.
- 1980** The 900-acre Saugatuck Dunes State Park is born.
- 1982** The master plan for Saugatuck Dunes State Park specifies future expansion to include the Denison and the Dune Schooner Rides.
- 1989** The Tri-Community Comprehensive Plan setting our communities' land-use goals and policies is published.
- 2000** The more than 400-acre Denison land becomes available for purchase and the negotiations on behalf of the public begin.
- 2002** Saugatuck Save Our Shoreline is created to purchase the Denison.
- 2003** Saugatuck Save Our Shoreline (SOS), the Conservation Fund, and the Land Conservancy of West Michigan raise funds needed to acquire the Denison.
- 2004** In early 2004, a local business leader, working with Saugatuck SOS, makes the first public offer of \$36 million for the entire Denison parcel. The Denison Estate and Trust do not respond and the offer expires. The Saugatuck Township Planning Commission begins planning for the R-4 Lakeshore Open Space Zoned District between Oval Beach and the State Park. This District allows no more than one house on five acres of buildable land. It also prohibits marinas and retail space. The second public offer to buy the Denison land for \$38 million is made during the fall. With the second public offer still on the table, Aubrey McClendon, buys an option for a partial interest in the Denison Estate. In effect this complex legal action blocks anyone but McClendon from purchasing the land.
- 2005** The updated Tri-Community Comprehensive Plan affirms "public acquisition of the Denison property on both sides of the Kalamazoo River is the top priority for the Tri-Communities."
- 2006** On January 25, following months of public input, the Township Planning Commission unanimously recommends the R-4 zoning ordinance. Following more public comment, the Saugatuck Township Board approves the R-4 zoning ordinance at their May 2 meeting. On August 2, McClendon/Saugatuck LLC assumes all right, title and interest in the entire Denison property. On August 14, the Township signs a Cooperation Agreement with McClendon/Saugatuck LLC agreeing to good faith consideration of McClendon's development plans. In return, McClendon's attorney, Stephen Neumer temporarily agrees not to sue the Township regarding the R-4 Zoning Ordinance.
- 2007** On May 24, McClendon/Saugatuck LLC files a petition with the Michigan Tax Tribunal requesting the property's taxable value be lowered to \$12 million.

- In December, McClendon/Saugatuck LLC attorney Stephen Neumer proposes a Settlement Agreement to the Township Board to eliminate the R-4 zoning requirements, circumventing the public planning process. Public outcry and legal advice from several attorneys lead to a scheduling of a special meeting on December 19 where more than 350 local citizens speak out in opposition to the proposed Settlement Agreement.
- 2008** Over 300 citizens attend the January 2 Township meeting and the vast majority speak against the proposed Settlement Agreement. Stephen Neumer requests the Township Board table the Agreement until a Planned Unit Development application is presented in the spring. On June 27, Stephen Neumer files a lawsuit on behalf of McClendon/Saugatuck LLC against the Deam/Severt families demanding access across their land. The Deam/Severt families own 10.8 acres of dune land, including the historic lighthouse. On July 17, Stephen Neumer presents details of a possible short-term lease of the south Denison to the City of Saugatuck. Saugatuck's City Council decides to delay further negotiations. In early August, McClendon/Saugatuck LLC agrees to negotiate a possible sale of the south Denison land to the City of Saugatuck. In late summer McClendon changes the name of his land holding company from Saugatuck LLC to Singapore Dunes LLC. At the December City of Saugatuck Council meeting the details of the purchase agreement between The Nature Conservancy and Singapore Dunes LLC are unveiled. It requires the Deam lawsuit and the Tax Tribunal lawsuits be resolved to Stephen Neumer's satisfaction.
- 2009** In January Stephen Neumer presents a preliminary plan for Singapore Dunes LLC for development of the north Denison to the Chair of the Saugatuck Township Planning Commission. It includes 24 houses in the dunes, 28 condo units, a marina with an estimated 70 slips, a hotel and restaurant. Current zoning prohibits marinas, docks, piers, and any commercial establishment. The proposed height of the development nearly triples those allowed in the Township. At the February 3rd Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund Board meeting the City of Saugatuck is both denied their out-of-cycle request for a \$15 million grant to acquire the inaccessible south Denison and urged to negotiate a more appropriate purchase agreement, given the inaccessibility of the property and the state of the economy. In March Stephen Neumer proposes a settlement to McClendon's tax assessment lawsuits against Saugatuck Township. He requests changing the tax valuation for McClendon's entire township properties—503 acres in total, 332 (66%) of which lie north of the river—in order to place 70% of the taxable value on the inaccessible and smaller south Denison (171 acres, or 34% of the total). In May, Stephen Neumer files seven additional tax assessment lawsuits.