

# Willowbrook parents skeptical of \$1.1-million remodeling plan

By ELAINE BOIES

A dramatic \$1.1-million remodeling plan that would provide "humanizing" living conditions for an eventual goal of 1,500 mentally retarded patients at Willowbrook State School was presented by the administration to a group of parents yesterday, one of whom labeled the concept "a piece of cake."

Dr. Miodrag Ristich, director of Willowbrook, and Harry Eliazarian, deputy director, described a proposal to remodel

Building 27, now housing 150 severely and profoundly retarded adults, as a hopeful solution to the overcrowding and physical disrepair that have plagued the institution for years.

Eliazarian displayed preliminary drawings of suites of one, two and four bedrooms separated by a spacious dining area and activity space; there would be shared baths, but with additional washing facilities in each bedroom.

Two exits, one from the living room and the other from an all-purpose "mud room," would lead to an exterior courtyard with attractive landscaping that includes a barbecue pit.

Eliazarian told approximately 40 parents at the meeting in Building 4 that construction should begin in July, and estimated a period of "18 to 21 months to completion."

And then he lit the fuse that ignited the remainder of the two-hour meeting.

"By the end of the renovation," he said, "that building will only house 47 residents, so you can see we plan to cut (the population) by two-thirds."

That's when the parents,

some representing the Benevolent Society for Retarded Children, and others the buildings their children live in, grew skeptical.

Their concern was prompted by the sudden closing last month of Building 78 — the institution's "country club" setting — without prior notice.

The building was shut down because of its non-functioning heating system, which was condemned by the city Health Department.

Most of the parents at yesterday's meeting believed they were there to discuss plans for reactivating the model program and for greater parent participation in administrative decisions.

Dr. Ristich concurred on the latter assessment. Earlier in the meeting he had told the group the Mental Hygiene Department's policy is "to encourage citizen participation in the department's programs."

In describing a "geographical unitization" plan soon to be implemented that would segregate residents in five units according to their home borough, the director said his goal was to organize parents into borough groups "and involve them in the planning."

But that was the long-range view, and the parents at yesterday's meeting were worried about current problems.

Someone asked Dr. Ristich what he expects to tell the parents of the 100 residents of Building 27 who will be "shifted somewhere else."

The administrator replied, "If they want better conditions for their children, parents must be

told that two-thirds of them will have to go. For every one that stays at Willowbrook, two have to be moved somewhere else."

Dr. Ristich was supported by two representatives from the Mental Hygiene Department, Kenneth Skrivanek and Edward Jennings, when he asked the parents to "set up a mechanism of communication that will satisfy you."

He asked Jerry Gavin, Benevolent Society president, to select or elect members of his group to serve as an advisory council that would represent parental views in planning.

But other parents, not active in the Benevolent Society, took exception to that suggestion because they, too, wanted to have a hand in administrative decisions.

An agreement was arrived at for the parents to "somehow" appoint a small committee they could trust to represent all parent organizations at Willowbrook and which could possibly be expanded to include agency members and non-parents interested in the welfare of the retarded.