

'Amazed' Russo asks halt to mental facility

By REGINALD PATRICK

Claiming he is "completely amazed" by the plan to use a 240-bed facility in Concord as a nursing care center for the mentally retarded, Assemblyman Lucio F. Russo yesterday said he will ask Dr. Alan Miller, commissioner of the state Department of Mental Hygiene, to "hold up on the project" until the community and interested groups can analyze the proposal.

The plan, which has already been criticized by an Island representative to the state's Mental Retardation Advisory Committee, involves the conversion of the unused facility at 1000 Targee St. — which was originally built as a nursing home — into the Island View Care Center for transferees from Willowbrook State School.

A working agreement has been signed by Willowbrook officials and the center's administrator, Israel Fogel, that would lead to the transfer of Willowbrook patients to the facility and the institution of care programs under specifica-

tions agreed to by state school personnel.

Russo said he knew "nothing" about the plan until he "read a story in the Advance" and received a phone call from an associate.

"It seems," he said, "unholy to me that there has been so much secrecy in this matter. I am certainly not unsympathetic to the problems of the retarded. I merely want the facts out in the open. I want to know that the facilities are adequate. After all, the building was originally built as a nursing home and not a place to take care of the mentally retarded."

The facility was originally built as the Danube Nursing Home, but never received a license as such.

Russo added that he expects to be hearing from "various civic organizations on this matter since the people of Staten Island certainly respond to changes of this sort."

Thomas Prisco, of Dongan Hills, a member of the state's Mental Health Advisory Committee, said the committee will

meet with state officials in Albany on Tuesday to discuss the proposal, which Prisco said will lead to "just another institution, a chance to make Willowbrook look better statistically."

Prisco, who is chairman of Community Board 3's health and hospital committee and a member of the Staten Island Regional Mental Retardation Council, claimed he had never been informed of the plan. The community, Prisco said, is "up in arms."

Prisco said he favored the use of small housing centers for the mentally retarded as an alternative to "Willowbrook-type institutions."

He said anyone with questions pertaining to the proposal may contact him by writing to his address at 34 Dongan Hills Ave., and he will in turn ask those questions at next week's meeting with state officials.

The proposal, which was reported in an Advance story earlier this week, has also been criticized by Pat Fraser, a spokesman for the Civil Service employes Association, a union which represents Willowbrook workers. Fraser called the plan "just a matter of physical movement."