

# Care center solution should focus on the retarded

By WILLIAM HUUS

Reports are spreading widely that the controversial Island View Care Center in Concord will soon be licensed and admitting patients transferred from Willowbrook State School because of strong pressure emanating from Albany.

The juiciest reports depict the pressure as purely political. The others concern the more obvious link tied directly to the state Mental Hygiene Department, which will benefit from the move whether the patients themselves do or not.

Last week, the Island Mental Retardation Council voted overwhelmingly to oppose the plan to use the vacant new facility as a nursing home for Willowbrook residents in need of medical care.

The objections seemed legitimately tied to concern for the welfare of the residents, although shaded with philosophical overtones. And, while the council has an ax to grind since it was ignored during the formulation of the proposal, the members appear to be sincere and dedicated people.

The meeting, however, also served to line up state and city mental health officials on opposite sides of the fence. Even though these officials talked about the welfare of the residents, and likely meant it, it is also easy to see how the political pressures come into play.

First the obvious one. Since the state was embarrassed through the public disclosures of the horrid conditions at Willowbrook, it has been under pressure from the public and courts to improve its system of caring for the retarded.

One agreed-to solution involves reducing the population at the massive institution by returning residents to small care centers in their home communities. (The Island council objected to Island View on the grounds that this principle is being ignored.)

Island View will at least serve to decrease the Willowbrook population. This is statistically important for the state. It will also shift the burden of financing care for the residents. This is more important.

Whereas the state now pays 100 per cent of the cost of each resident (about \$15,000 per year), at Island View it would pay 25 per cent of a similar figure, with the city paying 25 per cent and the federal government the remaining 50 per cent.

This also adds insight into the opposition voiced by city mental health officials who, while outwardly and perhaps genuinely are concerned about the issue of proper care, must have their eyes on the new cost burden they would inherit as well.

Now for the juicy reports. The care center was unable to obtain licensing from the state Health Department due to the agency's quota system for private nursing homes and it sat finished and unused for more than a year.

Suddenly, the "agreement" involving Island View, the Mental Hygiene Department and Willowbrook was announced, including plans to bypass normal procedures for licensing.

Who owns the care center has been a closely guarded secret throughout the controversy, but one rumor delivered by a few sources is that one of the owners has intimate ties politically with former Governor Rockefeller.

If true, this might explain the sense of urgency with which the matter is being pushed by state officials. It would also explain the more widely heard report that certain Republican legislators and business interests tied to Rocky have been trying to influence the decision to approve the center's proposed use.

Phil Fitzpatrick, Republican county chairman, strongly denied such influence was

coming from any GOP officials on the Island, although he admitted hearing the reports and said he "took it to mean Manhattan officials." He added that "personally, the idea (plan for Island View) sounds good to me."

Several weeks ago in commenting on the Island View controversy, I predicted that politics and misguided pressures would come to play a major role in the issue and lamented that the focus should instead be directed wholeheartedly to what long-range solutions can be developed to help the retarded.

Unfortunately, the prediction seems to be coming true.