

Willowbrook to demolish some buildings

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Officials of the state Department of Mental Hygiene may shortly proceed with plans to demolish some — and possibly all — existing buildings at Willowbrook Developmental Center and to transfer administrative and resident functions to the nearby Institute for Basic Research.

A memorandum obtained by the Advance reveals that the department is considering at least eight "construction options" for the controversial 384-acre institution, which houses 2,800 retardates and employs over 4,000 people in 44 buildings.

Included in the department's thinking is the possibility of construction of 25 four-bedroom houses and activity complexes on the grounds, a proposal which a member of the Willowbrook Review Panel, mandated by a federal court to oversee the institution's development, calls "disgusting."

Although a spokesman for the Department of Mental Hygiene says that future plans for Willowbrook are "just in the talking stage," the memorandum, sent to Regional Director Dr. Stuart L. Keill, requests a decision on the construction options by Sept. 15.

Interviews with local parent and consumer groups, and with spokesmen for the City Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation Services and the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disability Council reveal that none of these groups have been involved in the planning for Willowbrook's construction or demolition future.

The director of the Department of Mental Hygiene's facility planning says, however, that any demolition or rehabilitation of existing structures would call for a decision to be made by the state's Facilities

Development Corp. and the Office of General Services.

When told of the memorandum's contents, an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union — which was pivotal in the development of the court case which precipitated the consent decree ordering radical change at Willowbrook — said it did not represent a breach of the consent decree.

Attorney Chris Hanson said, however, "Much of it makes me uneasy. It certainly seems against the spirit of the decree."

Informed about the memorandum, which resulted from a meeting of seven employees of DMH on July 28, Review Panel member Murray Schneps said: "I would certainly like to see this type of document automatically be sent to the panel."

The memorandum is drawn up by Willowbrook Director Harold C. Piepenbrink. It says, in part, "We agreed that

we would restrict rehabilitating any of the existing ward buildings with the exception of the Children's Complex..."

"We should also strive to demolish all existing buildings which require service from the 40-year-old power plant we now have as soon as possible, to both effect savings and be more efficient."

The moratorium was drawn group agreed that "total demolition ultimately is necessary" for all buildings. Those recommendations, the July 29, three-page memorandum says, "take into account minimal humanization aspects of resident living quarters...as a primary objective..."

About Willowbrook's Building 2, the mammoth structure which presently houses behavior modification and psychiatric units and four intermediate care convalescent units, housing 91 residents, Piepen-

brink said in the memorandum: "Board up and request demolition of this monstrosity."

Schneps said he thought demolishing Building 2 would be a "beautiful idea." Anthony Pinto, president of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society, agreed, saying the building "was never designed for anything anyway."

The memorandum makes two references to possible increased population at the facility in the future. Presently there are no new admissions to Willowbrook and the consent decree orders that within six years the resident population must be reduced to 250 Staten Island residents.

The memorandum states: "The potential ultimate size is flexible, as will be explained, to meet the minimal Consent Decree estimates, as well as potential increased population to be determined at a later date."

An assistant to regional director Keill, Dr. Ida Gelber, who attended the July 28 meeting, said in an interview that "preliminary discussions" indicate there may be a need in the future for space for 400 to 500 residents.

"Certainly not 1000 residents," Dr. Gelber said, however.

She said that it was decided at the meeting "to leave some small maneuverability" because "we don't know what the population of Staten Island will be."

Attorney Hanson said that talk of reopening admission is "against the thrust of the decree" which orders 200 community placements by April 1976 along with development of an extensive network of community-based group homes.

Mental retardation officials estimate that at least 30 half-way houses, hostels or similar group homes for the retarded

will be needed on Staten Island. One is currently planned for 200 Tysen St., New Brighton, to be run by the Benevolent Society, a parents group. A second is in the discussion stages.

Although the July 28 meeting produced eight separate options which will eventually have to be decided on by Lawrence C. Kolb, director of DMH, the group apparently supported one specific three-pronged proposal which requested:

□ Total and complete rehabilitation of the Children's Complex (five buildings which house 500 residents).

□ Construction of 25 four-bedroom houses and activity complexes.

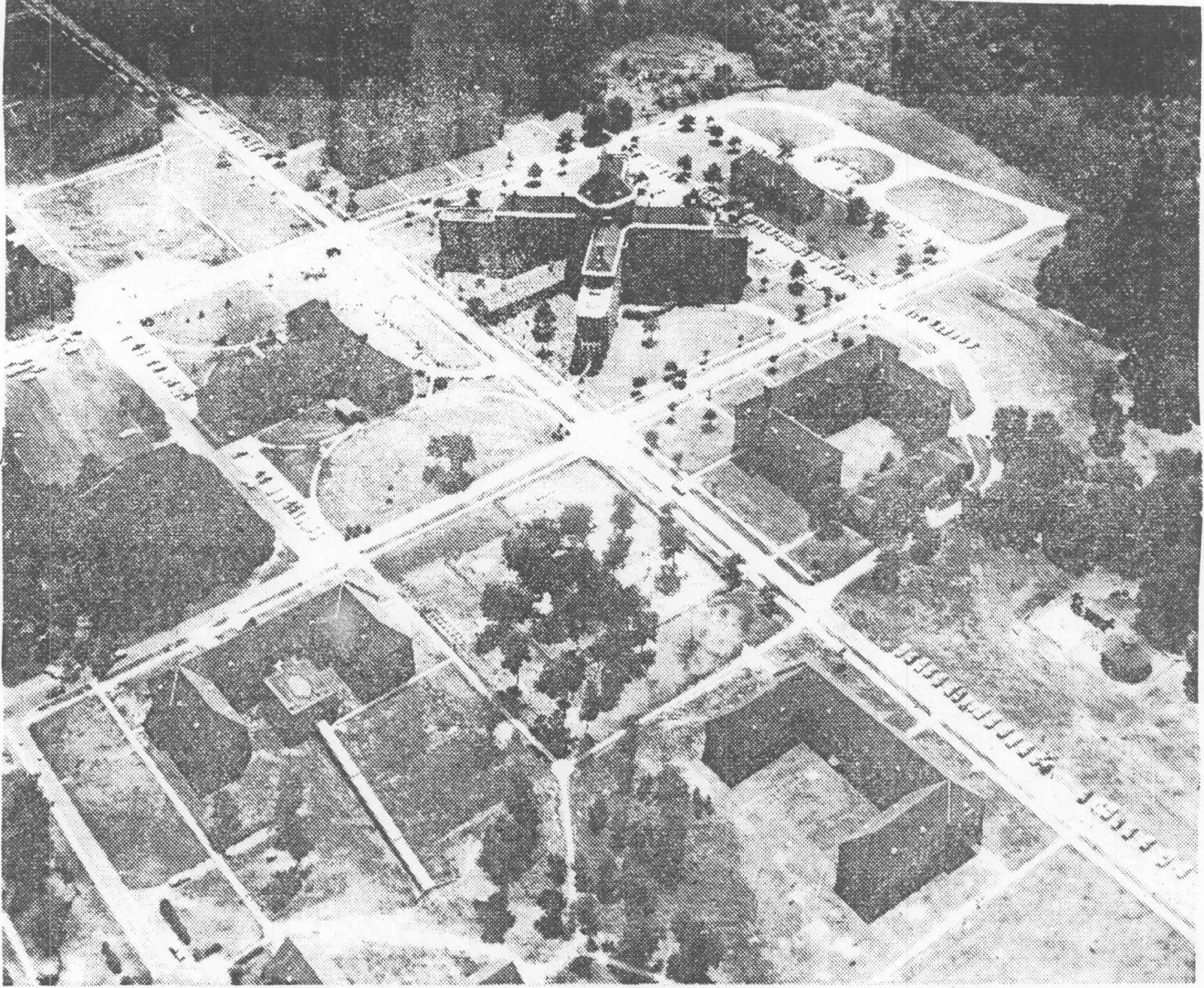
□ Transfer to the Institute of Basic Research all of Willowbrook's current support services, including administration, a small infirmary and the personnel and business office.

The memorandum then lists seven other options, consisting of combinations of the three parts of the first proposal. One option offered rehabilitating the under-utilized Institute for Basic Research whose management, one source says, has been resisting an influx of Willowbrook residents and staff.

The research center was built in 1967 and is located at Forest Hill Rd., Willowbrook. It is a fully air-conditioned ultra-modern building which cost \$7.5-million to construct.

Should the three-part major proposal be approved by Dr. Keill and Kolb, the memorandum says that the functions in Buildings 1, 2, and 46 would be moved to the research institute along with transfer of residents into "these living quarters which could be operated by outside agencies who are interested in developing and running various programs" at the institute.

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An aerial view of Willowbrook Developmental Center shows the spread of the complex and the mammoth size of Building 2, near top in center, which may be demolished by the state.

S.I. Advance Photo by Barry Schwartz

Schneps says that transfers of any kind or moves to other places have been halted by the Review Panel which is developing criteria for transfers of residents.

Because of pressure from the Department of Health about certain deficiencies in the Willowbrook plant, the memo indicates. Piepenbrink told Keill that "this proposal needs to be acted on as soon as possible."

Piepenbrink says he told the Health Department that he expected a decision no later than Sept. 15.

DMH's director of facility planning, George Gray, says the department's Facilities Development Corp. owns the Willowbrook property and the General Services Offices has legal responsibility.

A final decision on the future of Willowbrook, Gray says, contrary to the memorandum, is still years away.

Once the department decides what buildings at Willowbrook it will need, Gray says, DMH will have to canvass other state agencies to determine whether there is any desire on their part to use the abandoned buildings.

Gray said he thought it unlikely that the property or buildings would be sold to private interests after which it would automatically assume R3-2 residential zoning designation.

Members of local mental health and mental retardation agencies have expressed an interest in utilizing some of the existing Willowbrook buildings.

The Staten Island Little League, acting through South Shore Assemblyman Guy V. Molinari, has requested that 10 or 11 acres at Willowbrook be set aside for use as baseball fields. Willowbrook Park, a city-run facility.

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