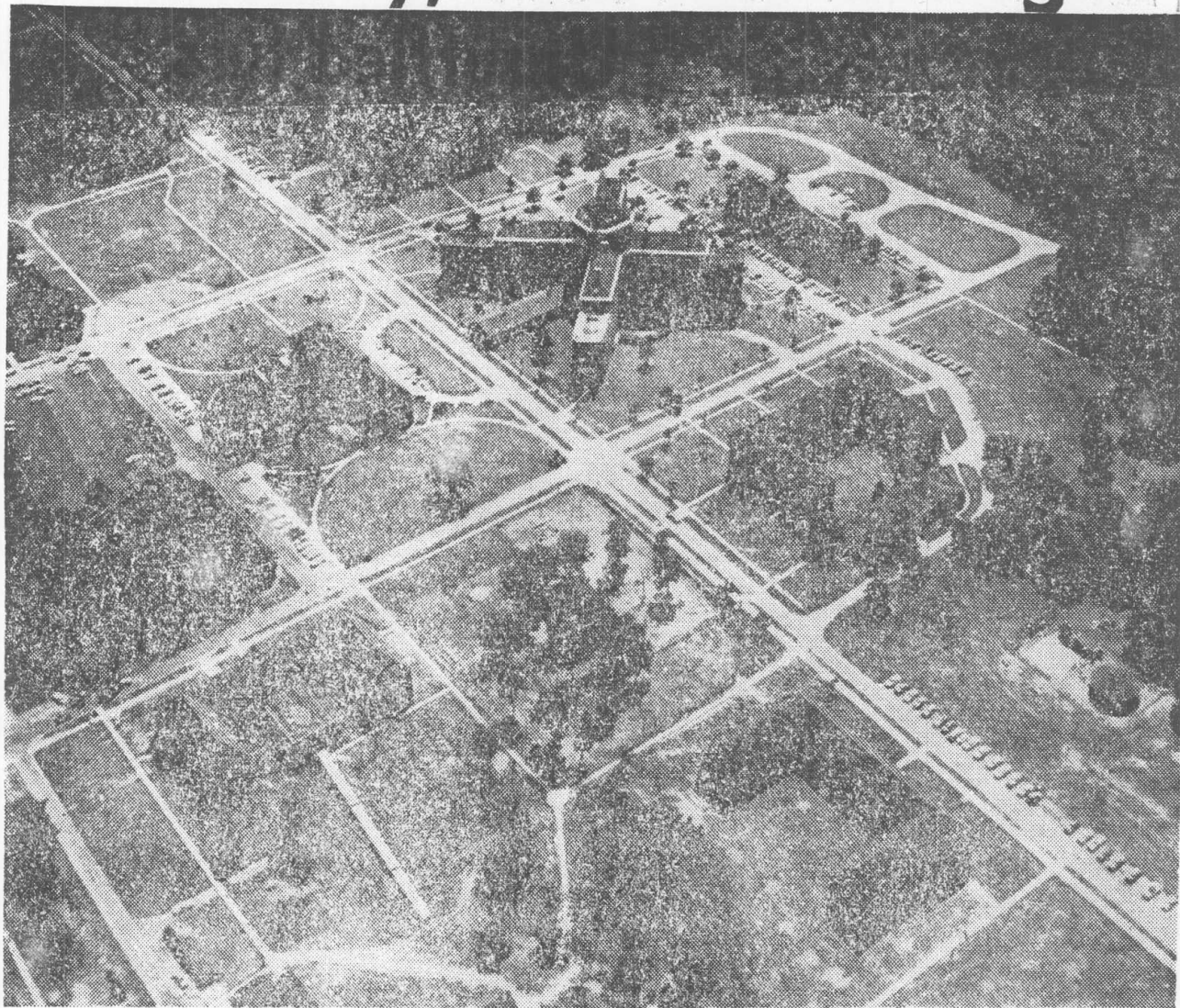


# Willowbrook to be park, university, medical college?



An aerial view of the Willowbrook Developmental Center shows some of the buildings and tree-lined streets which may eventually become part of a medical college or a city park.

S.I. Advance Photo

By ROBERT MIRALDI

The sprawling campus surrounding the Willowbrook Developmental Center may, in the 1980's, be turned into a city park, a medical college or a private university.

Those are three of the options now facing the City Planning Commission which has been asked by the state Department of Mental Hygiene to come up with land-use proposals for the 386 acres of land housing the 2,600-bed home for

the retarded.

Willowbrook is under a federal court edict to reduce its population to 250 residents by 1981 and, according to City Planning officials, it will need only about 120 acres of land.

What to do with the remaining 260 acres, however, is the issue which now faces the state and the city. "We've got to find a way to turn the land into a productive use," says Wilbur Woods, director of the Island office of the City Planning Commission.

In these years of constant fiscal crisis, what city officials would like most is to turn the area into a money-maker, producing tax revenue for city coffers. Woods calls it a "fantastic opportunity" for sound planning.

The Willowbrook campus, once called "a little town" by a state official, indeed presents endless planning opportunities for city and state planners.

There are approximately 40 buildings on the grounds,

which are bounded by Victory Blvd., Forest Hill Rd., and Willowbrook Park. The buildings have housed up to 6,000 persons at one time and during World War II over 140,000 veterans utilized the facility when it was a hospital.

On Forest Hill Rd., adjacent to the main campus, is the \$12-million Institute for Basic Research in Mental Retardation. On the other side lies Willowbrook Park, which is 162 acres of trails, ballfields, barbeque pits and horseshoe courts.

Adding to the planning possibilities are approximately 334 acres of land currently utilized by Sea View Hospital and Home, land which may become available in the near future as the city Health and Hospitals Corp. winds down its operation. The land is across Forest Hill Rd. from what was formerly a nine-hole golf course for Willowbrook workers.

The combination of Willowbrook Developmental Center, Willowbrook Park and Sea View gives the city almost 800 acres of planning area. A park would be a logical use, but Woods says that maintenance would be costly, especially since the city is already "facing the difficulty of maintenance costs" at Snug Harbor Cultural Center.

Woods stresses that planning for the future of Willowbrook is in a "very early status," but he adds that now is the time "to begin discussions about what kind of utilization" would best suit the existing buildings and land.

"It is not entirely up to the city," Woods says.

George Roberts, director of the Mental Hygiene Department's bureau of land management, says that at this point "anything is possible." Very preliminary discussions were held last fall, Roberts says, and the state is awaiting recommendations from the City Planning Commission.

"There has been no discussion about transfer of land," Roberts says about the state-

owned property which was first developed in 1939. Woods says there is no precedent for transfer of mental hygiene land from state to city.

At the Creedmore Psychiatric Center in Queens, 52 acres of land are being used by the city Park Department as a tree farm. In Brentwood, L.I., at Pilgrim Psychiatric Centers a portion of the grounds is presently being utilized by Suffolk County.

At Willowbrook, the New Springville Little League is using 12 acres of land for ballfields on the campus' old golf course grounds.

A kink in the plans for use of the area could be presented by the incomplete Willowbrook Parkway, a federal-state highway that begins at the Bayonne Bridge and runs to Victory Blvd., near the entrance to Willowbrook. It is not clear if the roadway will ever be completed, but if it is, it will probably run between the developmental center and the park.

Woods sees the "beautiful grounds" and "structurally sound" buildings as a good setting for a medical or private college along with possible medical research facilities. There could be a "series of compatible uses," Woods says.

"There is enough acreage for different uses," he adds.

Woods says that residential use of the grounds would be difficult, especially because of a city ordinance which prevents construction of large apartment complexes unless

they are within 1,000 feet of a city sewer line.

Building sewers on the property "would be absolutely crazy," says one Island engineer.

About a year ago, when Harold Piepenbrink was director of Willowbrook, there was discussion in the Department of Mental Hygiene about tearing down some of the center's 40 buildings, especially Building 2, a six-story structure which was once the central building for a hospital on the grounds.

Woods says it would be "foolish to tear down buildings." With the shortage of capital construction funds, he says, "we wouldn't want to jump into demolition" of the red brick buildings, which have for 35 years housed retarded persons in large, ward-like settings.

A complex of six buildings, near Forest Hill Rd., is planned as the eventual home for the 250 residents who will remain at Willowbrook. Other residents are being placed in community-based facilities.

"It could be marvelous," Woods says, "to connect the open spaces that make up Willowbrook."