

Our opinion

# Other uses can be found

A report just made public by the state Department of Mental Hygiene discusses the possibility of shuttering the entire Willowbrook Developmental Center complex in 1981, when its resident population is reduced from the present figure of more than 2,000 to only 250. It suggests that the remaining residents could be moved to a brand-new facility somewhere else on Staten Island.

Does that make sense? We don't think so. If all those buildings aren't needed to house the retarded, the alternative recommendation that all but nine of the 75 existing buildings be eliminated and 130 of the present 180 acres the facility occupies be surrendered, possibly even sold.

It would cost millions to provide a

center at another location. We agree with the court order that is compelling the shift of the majority of residents to community residences, intermediate care facilities, nursing homes and in some cases to their own families. The response has been much slower than anticipated, though.

The exodus will see fewer buildings needed long before that 1981 deadline, so there must be consideration of how to use what structures are worth saving. That decision shouldn't belong to the department alone. It belongs primarily to the residents of our Island and their representatives in government, but also to various agencies, both governmental and voluntary, who might have suggestions for future use.

When the Willowbrook facility was first built, it was taken over by the federal government during World War II as Halloran General Hospital, and more than 163,000 wounded and sick servicemen from the European war zones were treated there. After the war it became a Veterans Administration hospital, and continued in that role until 1952, when patients and staff were shifted to a new hospital in East Orange, N.J. or other VA hospitals.

It's unlikely that all those buildings and all that acreage will continue in use, but certainly some of them can serve community needs.

So now is the time for Islanders to speak up about what the possibilities are.