

# Old store eyed as center for retarded

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Administrators at Willowbrook Developmental Center have proposed converting a large Port Richmond structure, once the site of a department store that glistened with modernity, into a facility they say could serve today's needs of hundreds of mentally retarded people.

State officials have confirmed that although the subject has not yet been broached with the Island's North Shore community board, they are "very much interested" in leasing the two-story building, with basement, at 281 Rich-

mond Ave., until two years ago a Garbers store.

While conceding the estimated costs would be "substantial but not prohibitive," Department of Mental Hygiene officials are calling the location, with 30,000 square feet of space, an ideal spot for a day-program training center for use by up to 500 people from Willowbrook and Island homes.

They said such an all-purpose facility could help prepare Willowbrook residents for the non-institutional life they soon will lead, while filling a serious gap on Staten Island — where the number of private programs for the

handicapped can be counted on one hand.

Michael Mascari, deputy director of the mental hygiene agency's Metropolitan Placement Unit, said the training center proposal is being reviewed by his office, with discussion on programmatic changes, renovation and leasing requirements already taking place with Willowbrook administrators.

But he insisted, "We are in the exploratory stage. We've got to talk to the budget people and see if there's any money. Then, probably within two weeks," he said, "I assume the Willowbrook people will want to begin discus-

sions with the community board."

Cora Hoffman, a spokesman for Acting Mental Retardation Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin, confirmed that state funds could be redirected toward such a proposal this fiscal year.

She said the availability of money depends on a project's priority, and added, "I suppose if the proposal is sound and the owner is willing, this one would be at the top of the list."

Within two or three weeks, Mascari indicated, the placement unit, set up in 1976 to promote deinstitutionalized services for the retarded, will decide whether to give the state Facilities De-

velopment Corp. the green light to begin negotiations with the owners of 281 Richmond Ave.

The part owners are the Garber brothers of Staten Island, including Paul and his son, Murray, who told the Advance that a number of parties in addition to Willowbrook have expressed interest in leasing the imposing structure their family built in 1948 at a cost of nearly \$1 million.

The Garbers, however, said they would not disclose the leasing terms they are asking until a deal with one of the parties can be reached.

Faced with Georgian marble and rein-

forced in concrete, brick and steel, the Garber building, located at Albion Pl., was heralded once as a "big city store with a home-town heart."

The structure was considered by many architects the height of luxury, ahead of its time with fluorescent lighting, central air conditioning, elevator and landscaped-roof gardens.

But the once semi-rural Port Richmond neighborhood was citified apparently beyond the Garbers' expectations, and the department store eventually became a favorite target of

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