

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 cuffed apparently beyond the Garbers' expectations, and the department store eventually became a favorite target of

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vandals, graffiti artists and thieves.

So, in the autumn of 1975 with business apparently declining, the inevitable happened: The first Garbers of Staten Island, which opened in smaller Port Richmond quarters in 1924 and went on to become a shopper's dream, was shut down.

And now, as the Garber brothers had attempted, Willowbrook administrators

say they want to look to the future.

Under a court order to reduce the center's population, now at 1,700, to 250 by 1981, state officials said they're searching for locations throughout Staten Island to operate day programs that the deinstitutionalized retarded will need.

James Walsh, director of programming services at Willowbrook, said Garbers, because of its size, would be the perfect site for "a halfway center"

for residents preparing to leave Willowbrook and enter life in the Staten Island community.

And although he said Garbers was only one of a number of sites being considered, the placement unit said it so far has only been asked to review the Garbers proposal.

"If they're only use to the custodial-type care traditionally given to them at Willowbrook," Walsh said, "their entry into the community would be traumatic."

This way, they'd be getting services running the gamut, while traveling and getting to know the Island."

But Walsh explained that perhaps the biggest plus is that the leasing of Garbers would permit the operation of vocational, prevocational, recreational, educational and employment programs for mentally retarded people living in Staten Island homes as well.

"By hook or by crook," he said, "we've got to depopulate Willowbrook by 1981. We've got to offer them programs in the transition and when they leave the institution."

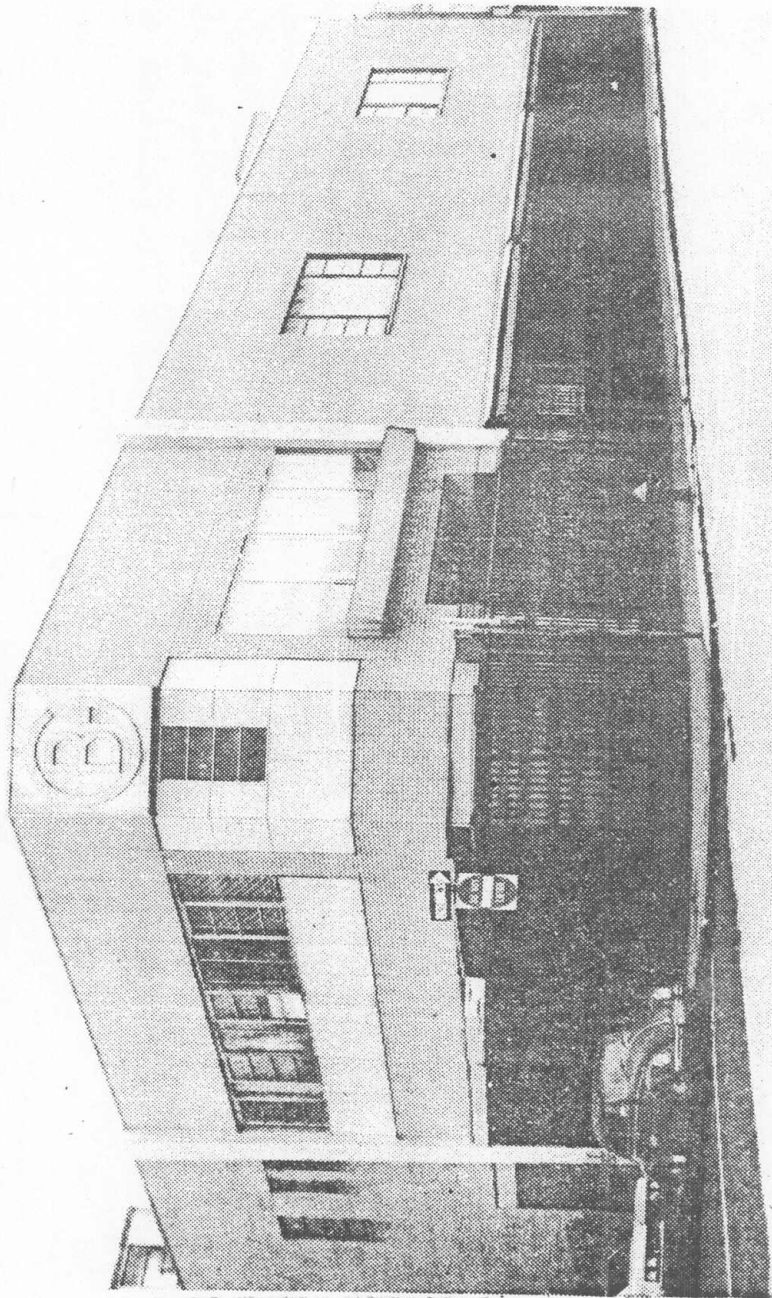
"We're only in the investigative stages right now, but we're going to want to talk this over with the entire Staten Island community because we're gonna need their support."

In addition to the new programs the center would provide, Walsh added, certain services in operation at Willowbrook now, such as a work activity program in Building 61, could be moved to such a location to make "more space at Willowbrook for other things."

State employees working at Willowbrook would be retrained to work in the community center, he said.

Walsh added that administrators do not perceive the possibility of a Garbers center becoming a "mini-Willowbrook" since no residents would live there and programs would be operated for different groups of people at different times during the day.

"This is a chance to serve a larger number of our residents," Walsh explained, adding that the 384-acre developmental center, criticized for years for its warehousing care, "is not the type of location you can use to help residents adjust to community life."



The site of the former Garbers department store at 281 Richmond Ave., Port Richmond, is being considered for rent by state officials, who would like to turn the building into a modern, all-purpose training center for the mentally retarded.

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