

Willowbrook eyes North Shore store

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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."

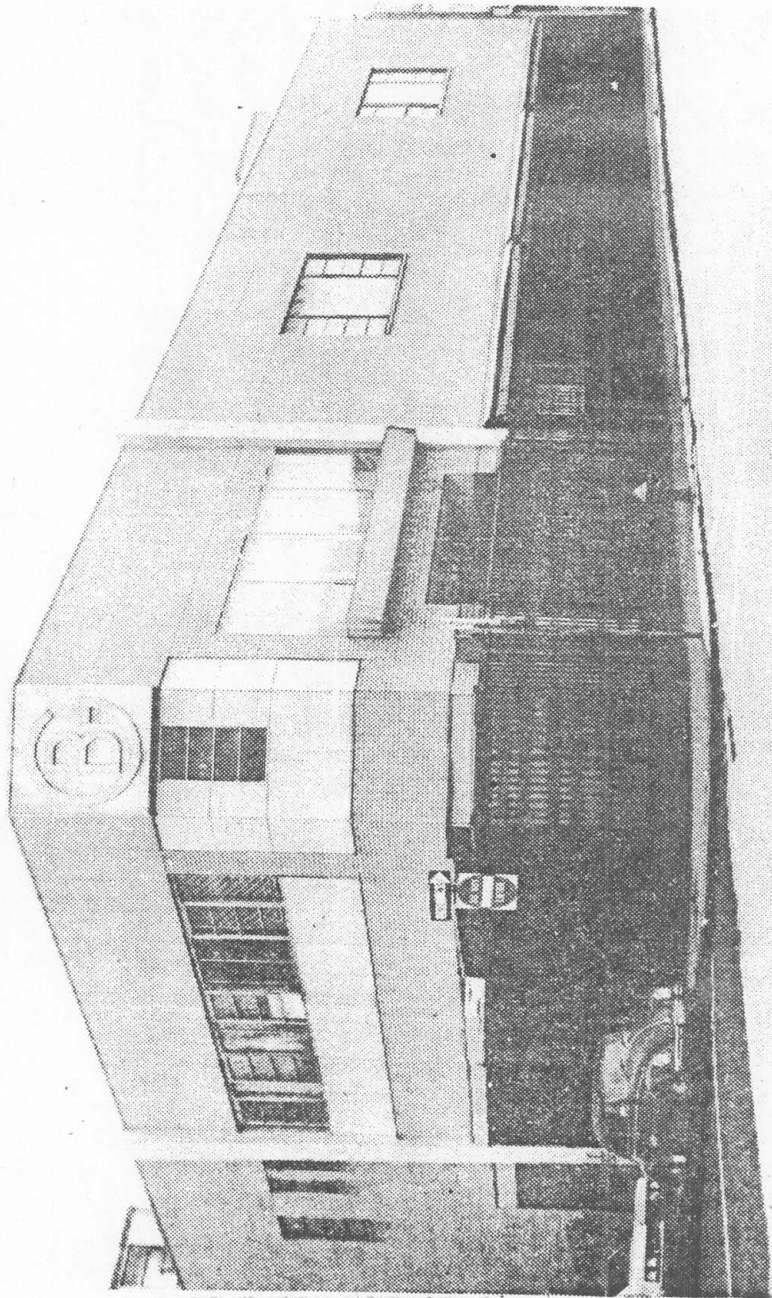
"We're only in the investigative stages right now, but we're going to want to talk this over with the entire Staten Island community because we're gonna need their support."

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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