

What does the future hold for Willowbrook's 382 acres?

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

In 1939, Gov. Herbert H. Lehman tipped through a \$12-million land deal, and on hundreds of acres of rich, tree-lined earth was carved a home for "mental defectives."

The home consisted of sturdy, red-brick buildings and was surrounded by wooded terrain so as to hide the residents from general view. Except for a war-time pause when the United States leased the facility as a hospital for wounded soldiers, it remained Willowbrook State School and packed away thousands.

The story climaxed in national scandal and resolved in the courts, with a 1975 order forcing Gov. Carey to dismantle the giant institution by transferring out all but 250 of its most profoundly retarded residents. A deadline of May 1981 was imposed.

Just three years from that target date, Willowbrook's final chapter is beginning to unfold, and the plot once again is centering on the land, its value and its future use.

Only this time the property that is Willowbrook — 382 acres speckled with 40 buildings of various sizes — is valued conservatively at \$46 million. And the state Facilities Development Corp., which guards state property, insists that that's merely a book price, with the real worth perhaps considerably greater.

The possibilities for future use, state officials conclude, are almost endless. A park, a medical school, a university or a housing complex are but a few of the projects that have been mentioned for the site.

But no one of those options is being viewed too seriously yet, since Department of Mental Hygiene officials say their most important goal remains to run down the institution's population, now at 1,600 residents, before any buildings are declared surplus or any final plans drawn.

"We don't want to get caught up in the game of giving up buildings and then

finding out a year later that we could have used them," explained Daniel J. Duffy, director of mental hygiene's long-range planning unit. "We haven't reached that point," he said.

Nevertheless, Duffy, along with other state officials, have developed a scenario for the future Willowbrook, which goes something like this:

Come May 1981 or soon after, Willowbrook will be a community-based facility serving Staten Island's disabled citizens.

The residents will be housed in a modern complex consisting of five buildings, now operated by the United Cerebral Palsy Association of New York and located at the eastern edge of the state property.

In addition to the residential buildings — 12, 14, 16, 26, and 28 — the DMH plans to retain three neighboring facilities as day-program areas for the residents.

The state-run power plant in Building 60, a maintenance area and an administrative center also will be retained, adding up, according to Duffy's estimates, to approximately one-half of the site's total acreage.

"It's a very negotiable figure," Duffy added, "depending a lot on the types of uses people have in mind. If they come up with a good proposal, the whole thing is really wide open."

But the process of surplus and closing buildings, according to mental hygiene agency spokesman Cora Hoffman, likely will take place slowly and in pieces.

"We're not going to shut the whole place down at once," she noted, adding that "we'll probably move to close a building, maybe in the foreseeable future, and then another and after that another."

If Willowbrook administrators themselves conclude the structures are no longer needed, that decision will trigger a "surplus" process in which the state Office of General Services surveys all state agencies to see if any of them need space.

It might be the Corrections Department, which Duffy says "has been hav-

ing a difficult time finding space for its programs," the Education Department or the Department of Motor Vehicles. The general services office then decides what a spokesman called "the highest and best use."

If it is determined that no state agency wants the land, city and federal departments are sampled, "and if that doesn't work either," Duffy said, "then it goes up on the auction block."

Paul Steinkamp of the Office of General Services, calling Willowbrook a "rather valuable piece of land," believes the state will be able to sell the property "quite quickly, but we can't make any definite plans until mental hygiene abandons it to us."

"We've had land upstate go to farmers, municipalities, and some to historic preservation," Steinkamp added.

"We try to work with local planners," he said "to get their ideas."

And in the case of Willowbrook, the Staten Island Office of the City Planning Department is exploring the possibility of having a portion of the creek-lined Willowbrook designated as a wetland.

On the northwest section of the property, according to city planner Nancy Rosan, streams feed into Willowbrook Park, giving this area "unique local significance."

And the buildings themselves, Ms. Rosan said, are "sound. There might just be an institutional recycling of the structures...It might make a beautiful campus complex."

Or, she said, a portion of the Willowbrook property could be used as additional city park area. "It's an open space resource," Ms. Rosan noted, "and good for many purposes."

But the decision to begin the process of closing, surplus, surveying and selling rests with Department of Mental Hygiene officials, who insist they have no definite plans and will have none until Willowbrook is a little smaller.

And until that time, perhaps a year from now, the future use of 200 acres of land smack in the middle of Staten Island is likely to remain a mystery.