

Building homes for mentally handicapped

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

Five years ago state mental retardation officials became active in the real estate business, renting and buying housing. This year, the same officials are poised to take a bigger step, building housing from scratch.

In its supplemental budget last November, the state legislature granted funding for the construction of four homes for the mentally retarded on Staten Island.

The proposed homes, with room for 10 residents apiece, are a wrinkle in the state's latest effort to comply with the Willowbrook Consent Decree, signed in Brooklyn Federal Court in April 1975.

The decree was designed to cor-

rect overcrowding, filth, neglect and abuse that a judge decided violated the constitutional rights of nearly 6,000 mentally retarded people living in the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook.

Group-living in the outside community, the judge decided, would provide the humane, nearly normal, environment that the massive institution seemed incapable of creating.

Time is running short. The latest state census shows 1,045 residents remaining at the Willowbrook institution. By Oct. 1, the state has promised the court to transfer all but 669 of the institution's population into community residences.

"The sense of urgency has always been there because we believe that what's best for the individual is best for the institution, too," said John Tillou, coordinator of the developmental center's community placement effort.

But the venture into the real estate business was stalled by homeowners' complaints that mentally retarded neighbors might lower property values. Five years' experience has started to calm those fears.

"As more homes have opened, the local people are taking the attitude: 'We'll mind our business as long as they're minding theirs,'" Tillou said.

"The neighbors aren't getting involved as much as we'd like; there's not a great deal of integration. But there's very little overt disgruntled behavior," he added.

For the newest community residences, the state Office for Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities secured two vacant lots in Oakwood and Annadale.

Community Board 3 originally approved two more vacant land par-

cels for the same use, but the city sold them at auction before mental retardation officials could negotiate to buy.

Tillou noted that the land submitted by the community board is "not in highly sensitive areas." It tends to lack vegetation and access by roads, he said.

But thinking philosophically, he suggests that the borough's development boom may soon deposit a townhouse complex opposite the home for the mentally retarded. "Then we won't get any flack from people saying we're invading their neighborhoods. If you want to buy near us, that's your choice," he remarked.

Building as opposed to renovation has major advantages, Tillou said. Builders can incorporate safety and therapeutic features needed by the severely and profoundly retarded.

As a consequence, the newly constructed homes are expected to house the mentally retarded who also suffer from physical disabilities requiring special equipment like wheelchair ramps.

Over the years, the state has bought or leased seven homes in the borough. They vary in size, with living space for six to 12 persons, and they are operated by private agencies.

Civic associations have tried to block the opening of two of the homes, at 630 Hylan Blvd., Grasmere, and 158 Cromwell Ave., Dongan Hills. A Staten Island Supreme Court ruling finding the sites appropriate is under appeal. If the higher court upholds the ruling, the homes are slated to open in three to six months, Tillou said.

In addition, the Office for Mental Retardation operates 12 three-bedroom apartments on Staten Island. A private agency under state contract runs 11 more three-bedroom apartments.