

Commentary

Island residents must have say in disposition of Willowbrook land

By ROBERT MIRALDI

When I was 8 years old and playing Little League baseball, my team used to practice at Willowbrook Park, mostly at one of the small fields that are next to the park's thick woods. Foul balls often would sail into those woods.

For me at least, it was as exciting to chase an errant horsehide as it was to stand and catch one at third base. I would dash through the thick vines, stir up the pheasants and hop over a stream in pursuit of the ball. Invariably it would be found nestled between tall green ferns.

Sometimes during practice disabled residents of what was then called Willowbrook State School would wander over and chase the balls on the field. They looked funny to us, and we probably looked pretty funny to them too. But they didn't bother us and we didn't bother them.

Years after my Little League career was over, when I was a reporter for the Advance, I was assigned to write about Willowbrook State School where a national scandal was still bubbling over and public outrage at living conditions was forcing the state — finally — to make changes.

Among the promises the state made, still not fulfilled by the way, was to reduce the center's population from thousands to 250. What that would mean, among other things, was that eventually New York State would have little need for the dozens of brick buildings and the approximately 380 acres that now comprise the Staten Island Developmental Center.

The state certainly will need some buildings for residential and administrative use and a good-sized chunk of land for the recreational needs of the center's remaining residents. But that would still leave a large surplus of property, perhaps as much as 250 acres.

Up until now no one has come forward with any plan for those buildings or that land which, few people seem to know, contains thickly wooded patches crisscrossed by streams, concrete pathways surrounded by tall shade-giving trees and large grassy open spaces where Staten Island's booming population has begun to carve out informal ball fields.

Because no one has come forward with a plan for this publicly owned property, however,

'Up until now, no one has come forward with any plan for those buildings or that land... But that no one's interested in acquiring chunks of land.'

doesn't mean that no one's interested in acquiring chunks of land. Some building concerns have already submitted plans to state officials for housing clusters.

And some state officials have speculated about the price that such a lucrative piece of land could garner on the open market.

But money-grabbing and commercial ventures are not the only ways in which officials have viewed this land. This would make an incredible park or university, Stone city official told me a few years ago.

The park-university complex is an interesting one.

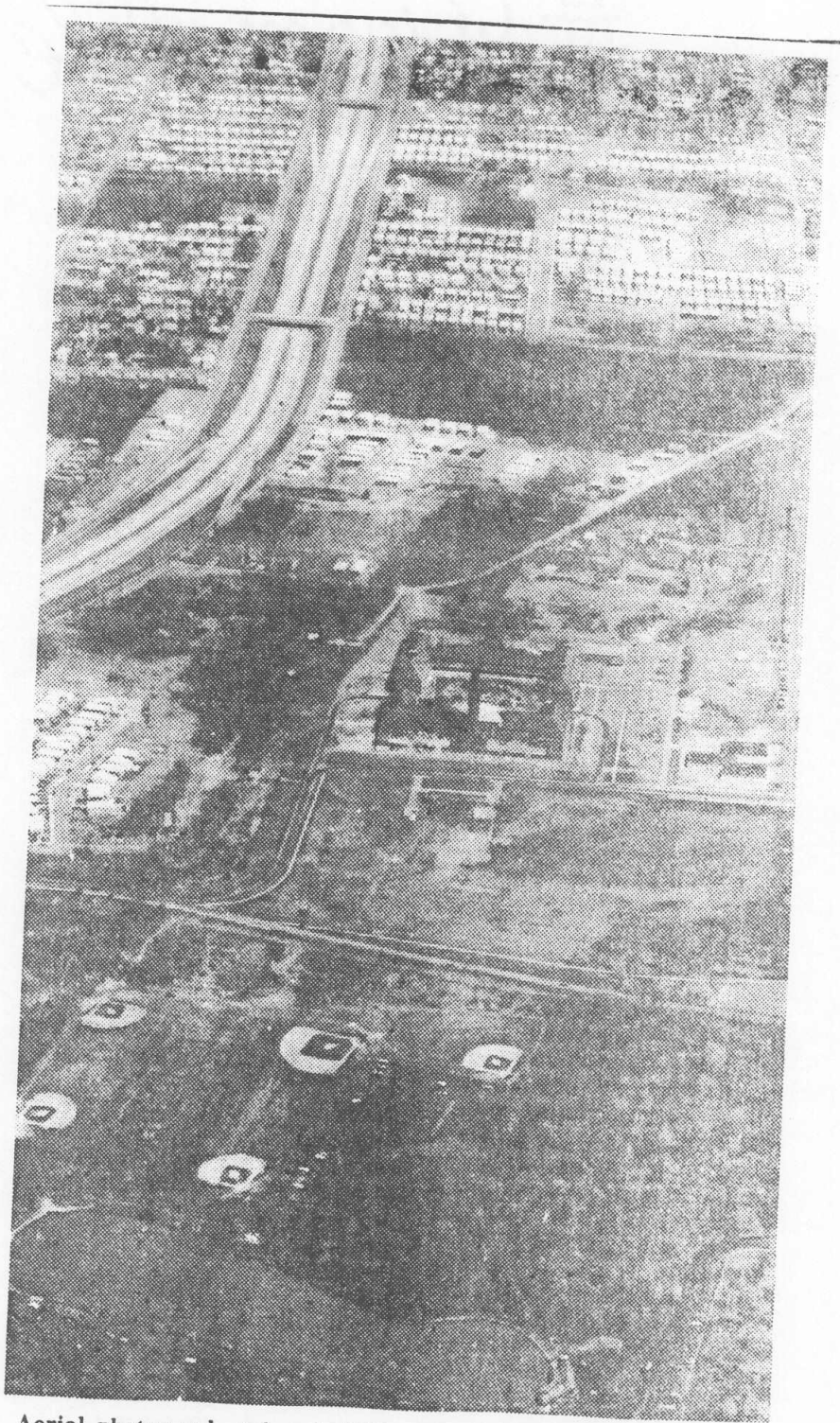
The College of Staten Island has been seeking a unified campus for years now and one seems to have looked very closely at this property. Could the buildings be converted? Could the college work with the state Office of Mental Retarda-

tion in putting together health-related programs for care of the disabled? It would be costly and there would be problems but certainly it's a possibility worth discussing.

The park idea seems too good to be true. Willowbrook is an area that has experienced tremendous growth in the past decade. On any summer weekend Willowbrook Park, consisting of 120 acres, is overrun with people; the ballfields can't take the traffic. The crowding and the park's condition will only get worse.

Linking the park with the development center seems only logical. Already it has been done by people. First, is the so-called White Trail, a hiking path that begins at the archery field of the park and cuts between the developmental center and the park's thick back woods.

Page 7
3 Page



Aerial photograph, taken in 1969, shows residential development already was well under way near the former Willowbrook State School, center. Willowbrook Park is at the bottom of the photo.

Page 2
4
3 Page

The trail is unlike any other on Staten Island. Tall vines climb the trees and hardly a soul ever disturbs the area's vegetation. The path runs past the New Springville Little League fields (near Forst Hill Road) and eventually goes into LaTourette Park.

With a dearth of ballfields on this Island, which was once dotted with baseball diamonds, the large open spaces of the developmental center are daily used by teams with no place else to go. The teams leave their cars in the park and walk a dirt path right onto the developmental center's grounds.

Certainly a park and a university are not the only possibilities.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly, whose office is on the developmental center grounds and who has been urging the state to move quickly to plan for its future has received numerous requests for use of the state land.

For example, McKee High School, with an outmoded building and no property has looked into the possibility of relocating to the center's grounds. There is an active vocational training shop there for the center's residents and a relationship between the vocational high school and the state seems made to order.

Various community groups have been asking to use some of the vacated state buildings, but thus far little has been done in that direction. If normalization of the lives of the disabled is a state goal, and it seems a wise

one, it is hard to understand why more integration of the community into the life of the center hasn't taken place. Is less use and eventual dumping of the land a higher state priority?

Planning schemes like I'm proposing here always look dandy in print. But, of course, lots of things could get in the way of the kind of planning that would benefit the people of Staten Island. I see three real roadblocks.

First, the U.S. Navy Resale Office is bound to resurface as a possibility if court actions thwart its attempt to go into Fort Wadsworth. This project would mean jobs but also cars and possibly the loss of much land to the public.

Second, the Willowbrook Parkway is still on the city's maps, planned to cut between Willowbrook Park and the developmental center. Everyone says it will never be built, but it's still on the maps and no real planning can be done until it's taken off.

Finally, there is the never-ending lust of the city for tax-producing property. Money has a high priority with this city administration, which might look favorably on rows of houses instead of rows of ferns. As for the state, owner of the property, well, Gov. Carey's position in favor of the Tavis power plant shows his concern for Staten Island. He is not to be trusted.

The City Planning Commission is right now doing a study of Staten Island's so-called Greenbelt, which ought to include this state property. The study ought to lay out the options for the property and then throw those options out to the public for a decision.

After all, we do own that property, and shouldn't we — not Albany or City Hall — decide what to do with it?

(Robert Miraldi, a Mariners Harbor resident, teaches journalism and communication at St. John's University.)

2
Page 3
of
3 Pages