

By MARY BETH PFEIFFER

The state has hired a consultant to study the future of almost 300 acres of the Staten Island Developmental Center — prime property in central Staten Island that is to be "surplussed" when the institution reduces its population in coming years.

An outline of the study's scope, made available to the Advance, for the first time raises the possibility that the land may be sold for residential or other development. Officials of the state Office of General Services, however, insist they are exploring all options with an open mind.

"We have no use planned at this time," said Ray Casey, the office's assistant director of design and construction. "We want someone to collect data and to give us some recommendations."

State officials said Gruen Associates had been retained for the nine-month study, which is expected to begin shortly. The state is now negotiating on the firm's fee, which Casey said will range from \$100,000 to \$200,000.

The developmental center, which now has 860 residents and is to phase down to 250 by early 1983, consists of 65 buildings on 382 acres of land, which is dotted with tracts of undeveloped woods as large as 25 to 30 acres. The Willowbrook center itself is to retain about 100 acres and seven buildings; the remainder is the focus of the study.

Because the land is considered by many environmentalists and civic leaders to be part of the unofficial Staten Island Greenbelt, any attempt at large-scale development is expected to generate controversy. In addition, it is used by many athletic groups, having seven playing fields in the southwestern portion and another five in the northeastern section that were recently devel-

oped by the New Springville Little League.

In order to determine "what is compatible with the community," Casey said, the consultant has been directed to meet with community board officials twice during the study period. In addition Gruen officials already have attended one meeting on a study of the future of the Greenbelt, now being conducted by the City Planning Department.

State officials conceded that the value of the property — in an area where vacant land is at a premium and homes sell for \$80,000 — is what prompted the study.

"Given the population (on Staten Island), it's not like having surplus in South Buffalo," Casey said, referring to an area where vacant land was once common.

"When we're sitting on a piece of property like Staten Island, we think it's best to plan for the future even before it is surplussed."

According to the study's scope, the consultant is to do an extensive probe of the land's drainage, topography, zoning, electrical and sewer systems, natural features, geology, buildings and other aspects in order to determine its future potential.

"The evaluation," the scope reads, "shall consider all avenues of possible use, including but not limited to continued institutional, residential, commercial, industrial, recreational and/or a combination of the above."

Under one of four major topics of review, entitled Economic Analysis of the Surrounding Area, the consultant is directed to, "Prepare text evaluating the market potential of the site by identifying major development elements . . . and by interviewing possible area developers."

In addition to the Office of General Services study, the state Office of Mental Retardation, which manages the developmental center, is studying how to consolidate the center's widely scattered offices and wards into the area to be retained. That area is located in the northwest quadrant, between Willowbrook Rd. and the Institute for Basic Research in Mental Retardation.

James Walsh, deputy director for administration, said the center will probably be ready to give up the surplus land by March or April of 1983, when the population is expected to have shrunk to 250 residents. The center, which once had 6,000 mentally retarded residents, is slowly moving its population into small, community-based group homes which are considered a better environment than the institution.

The land to be eliminated includes four group homes run by private agencies in residences formerly used by the center.

Richard Buegler, president of the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, a local environmental organization, said the group recently added the Willowbrook property to its list of Island endangered natural areas. He and other environmentalists first explored the property last spring and discovered many seldom-found plants and trees, including a stand of sugar maple trees, one of two on Staten Island.

"I was terribly impressed by what was there," he said, adding that the area is important as a means of flood control. Corson's Brook and its tributaries, as well as the land itself, absorb significant amounts of rainwater in an area already prone to flooding, he said.

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