

Our opinion

Willowbrook land study must include all options

Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, and some members of Community Board 2, have expressed fears that a state-sponsored study on the future of land and buildings at the Staten Island Developmental Center is shaping up as nothing more than a whitewash.

Based on some preliminary findings presented by a consulting firm the other evening, those fears certainly appear to be well founded. The thrust of the study thus far quite clearly seems aimed at the sale of the Willowbrook property for some sort of residential or commercial development.

Representatives of Gruen Associates, the consulting firm retained by the state Office of General Services, emphasized repeatedly that the presentation of data to community board members in no way constituted a recommendation for the developmental center's disposition. No recommendations will be formulated, the representatives said, without input from the community board and other interested groups and individuals.

If that's really the case, all of the Island's public officials must make clear to both the state and its consultant that the sale of the Willowbrook property is without question the least desirable alternative.

The developmental center, which includes scores of solid buildings on more than 380 acres, is to be phased out within a few years as all but a handful of the individuals now housed there are moved to community residences and similar facilities. Since the sprawling complex no longer will be needed by the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, it has fallen to the general services agency to determine how the land and buildings might best be used.

In assessing the center's fate, it must be understood that buildings occupy a relatively small part of the Willowbrook acreage. Much of the state-owned land is undeveloped, and contains trees and other vegetation uncommon elsewhere on the Island.

At the very least, the land that's undeveloped — and which borders on the Island's Greenbelt — should remain that way. Open space is a valuable yet often unappreciated resource; those who recognize its worth — a group we hope includes the borough's elected officials and community leaders — will fight with all their might to keep undeveloped developmental center land in its natural state.

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