

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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As for the developed portion of the center's property, Mrs. Connelly and others have offered a number of sensible proposals for utilization of the existing buildings. One suggestion is to use the buildings as a new consolidated campus for the College of Staten Island, which now has students in both St. George and Sunnyside; another idea is to use the buildings as offices for some of the state agencies now housed in the World Trade Center in Manhattan.

The center's buildings, as we said, are solidly constructed and in good condition. It would be both unfortunate and wasteful if opportunities for their continued use were not thoroughly explored.

It's possible, of course, that no plan for immediate conversion and use of the buildings will prove feasible. But that should not necessarily lead to a decision to raze the buildings and make the land available to private developers.

The fact that the Willowbrook buildings might not be needed for public purposes today does not necessarily mean some use for them might not become apparent in the future. Indeed, the certainty that the Island's population will continue to grow in the years ahead makes it certain there will be an increasing demand for all sorts of public facilities, some of which might lend themselves to location at the centrally located Willowbrook complex.

What we're suggesting, in short, is that "banking" the Willowbrook buildings for possible use in the future would be far preferable to destruction of those structures to make way for new development.

The state's consultants, unfortunately, appear to have given preservation of the Willowbrook buildings little, if any, serious consideration to date. Judging by the information presented to the community board, the consultants' data-gathering process seems predisposed toward formulating a recommendation that all or part of the Willowbrook property be sold.

Mrs. Connelly should not have to stand alone among public officials in questioning the scope and impartiality of the state-sponsored study. It will be much easier to guarantee sensible planning for Willowbrook's future if officials band together now and insist that the consultants' study be truly comprehensive in scope; waiting until that study is completed; and attempting to fight what might be an adverse recommendation, would only increase the likelihood that the Island's best interests will be overlooked once again.

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