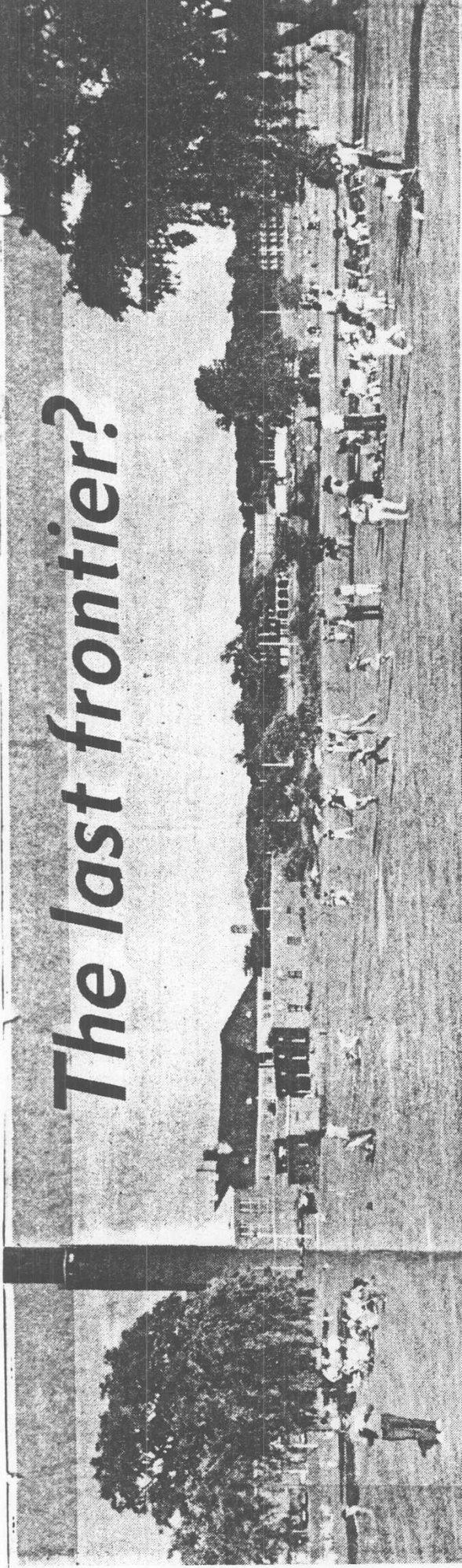


The last frontier?



The wide-open spaces of the Staten Island Developmental Center could be the last hope for new sandlot sports fields on Staten Island.

S.I. Advance Photo by Frank J. Johns

By BILL MARONEY

Staten Island, as everyone knows, is growing. Staten Island's sandlot sports leagues, as everyone involved in them knows, are growing.

What isn't growing, as anyone who has tried to obtain a permit or hold an impromptu practice knows, is the number of baseball, softball and soccer fields on Staten Island.

And just when people are beginning to discover relief, in the form of available acreage at the Staten Island Developmental Center, that relief might be taken away. A state-underwritten study to examine alternatives for use of the land could result in the fields being converted for other

uses.

But that is down the line. Right now, the problem at the developmental center may be underutilization of fields rather than overcrowding. Even with a baseball, a softball and two soccer fields in use, the potential of the site is far from being realized.

The Staten Island Developmental Center may, in fact, be our borough's last frontier for ballfields.

Patchwork fields carved all around the existing fields show the possibility of at least three more official softball diamonds

State studying Willowbrook fields

while a smaller field in the rear of the facility could serve as a practice area.

But both the existing and potential fields may be in jeopardy. The SIDC, formerly the Willowbrook State School, is reducing the number of its mentally retarded residents from 900 to 250, a transfer process expected to take 18 months to two years. (An April 1985 deadline has been set by the state.) The SIDC will not need the entire 330-acre, 64-building complex and hopes to have arrived at a decision on the future use of the land by then.

In effort to determine the long-term possibilities of the land, Gruen Associates, a consulting firm hired by the state Office of General Planning, has been conducting a study that will outline a plan of options for use of the area. But until the study is completed (the first of three phases will be released shortly) the issue is up in the air.

"We don't know what will happen," said Thomas Tierney, an SIDC spokesman. "Hopefully, nothing to hinder the community's use of the fields will come about and they can be utilized to

their fullest potential. "We've had many different organizations requesting use of the land, but we don't have the power to grant permission. We just try to funnel the requests to the study people so that they are aware of the possible uses of the area."

At present, 12 softball leagues, as well as the Staten Island Soccer League, Middle-Island Youth Baseball League, Mid-Island Sports Group and Staten Island Jewish League call the SIDC home while the Snug Harbor and Mid-Island Little Leagues use it

for practice sessions. The SIDC grounds also house the New Springville Little League, a three-field complex with more than 300 youths participating.

According to Tierney, the parking facilities are "adequate" and all a team needs do to obtain a field permit is submit a written request, although permission must now come from the state offices in Albany, where use of the land is being closely monitored. The "fee": Teams are asked to do something to help the kids, such as holding toy drives and conducting clinics.

"You can go there anytime and see the extensive use it gets," said Tierney. "It's in use five (See WILLOWBROOK, Page S-8)