

State plan eyes Center as huge condo complex

A study prepared for New York State says the Staten Island Developmental Center could be converted into a condominium development of 1,200 to 1,600 units.

The report, prepared by Gruen Associates for the state Office of General Services, also says the 330-acre Willowbrook site has a potential to house commercial office space because it could offer lower rents than Manhattan and other areas.

The study was ordered after Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly, a Democrat who has her offices at the center, expressed concern for the future of the facility. The center, which housed over 5,000 mentally retarded residents in the 1970s, is working to reduce its population from over 700 to 250 by 1985, when it will consolidate to a small part of the 64-building campus.

Mrs. Connelly said the two-inch thick report "tells us what we knew from the start — that the Willowbrook property is worth a bundle if it is cut up in little pieces and crammed shoulder-to-shoulder with condominiums."

But she said the study should have given more consideration to other uses for the property, including the option of preserving portions for open space.

The report said such an option would "miss the opportunity for the site to absorb a certain amount of high-quality development — and therefore to provide

"Old people need a place to live and the SIDC campus would be ideal," Mrs. Connelly said.

The report said that one or more of the existing buildings on the center campus could be converted for elderly housing.

The consultants studied the location, topography, drainage, sewage, geology and other aspects of the center property and concluded that "the strengths of the site encouraging development outweigh the limitations."

The report found that the property had some unusual natural features, including a 15-acre tract traversed by a brook that would suffer irreversible damage if developed. The tract, known as Corson's Brook Woods, contains the largest stand of sugar maples on the Island and is the only place in the borough where sycamore trees grow wild.

"It is clear that we've got something very rare and valuable here — a large tract of relatively unspoiled land in the heart of the urban sprawl," Mrs. Connelly said.

"What I am saying now and I've said before is that the existing 64 buildings ought to be used and reused," she continued. "If they are good for office space, make office space; if they are good for senior citizens housing, make that. But it ought largely to remain the community resource that it is now."

The assemblywoman noted that center fields are used by 17 sporting groups that would have no place to go if the land is developed. The fields are also used for the Special Olympics and United Cerebral Palsy's Field Day and by handicapped scouts. Yet, she complained, this use is not mentioned in the state report.

the borough with positive economic impact in terms of construction jobs over the short term and increased tax revenues and spin-off developments over the long term."

Mrs. Connelly said she was disturbed that the report "clearly favors development, as if money matters outweigh everything."

"Although it would not be as profitable," she said, "the idea of minimal development along with preserving certain natural areas ought to be given equal weight."

According to the report, the Willowbrook site could hold a medium-density condominium development — including both high-rise and townhouse buildings — of 1,200 to 1,600 units that would be expected to sell at the rate of 175 to 200 units a year. In addition, the report estimates that 250,000 to 500,000 square feet of office space at the center would probably be marketable.

The report rejects three other potential uses, including a major retail center because, it notes, there is already a large shopping center near the center. It also rejects light or heavy industry because of competition from the Staten Island Industrial Park and a major commercial recreation venture because it would be prohibitively expensive to build.

Mrs. Connelly, who chairs the Assembly Mental Health Committee, noted that the report points to "tremendous excess demand" for affordable housing for the elderly, with large waiting lists for Staten Island elderly housing.

—BRUCE ALPERT