

Editorial page

Our opinion/

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Willowbrook land study ignores the best options

State officials will be guilty of a major blunder if they accept a consultant's recommendation that the 330-acre Staten Island Developmental Center site in Willowbrook be developed as a residential complex, with the possibility of some commercial office space thrown in on the side.

The report, prepared for the state Office of General Services, is grossly deficient because it clearly was based on one premise: to reap the maximum economic gain from disposition of the state-owned land. Consideration of financial considerations alone doesn't make for responsible planning, which is why the state must commission a new study that will fairly and impartially evaluate all possible uses for the property.

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The fate of the Willowbrook acreage will be decided by state officials within the next few years as the developmental center, which once accommodated over 5,000 persons, reduces its population to 250 and consolidates its operations within just a few of the 64 buildings it now controls. Any land and buildings not needed by the scaled-down developmental center will be available for disposition by the state.

According to the consultant's report, surplus land at the center should be sufficient for a condominium development of 1,200 to 1,600 units, plus 250,000 to 500,000 square feet of office space. As the consultant noted, such development would have a "positive economic impact" through the creation of short-term construction jobs, expansion of the Island's real estate tax base and the attraction of new jobs to the office complex.

All of that sounds good. But pursuit of the course advocated by the consultants would require destruction of both the buildings on the developmental center campus and many acres of open space.

Given its interest in maximum financial yield from the state property, the consultant's report had only negative points to make about the preservation of buildings and space. But adaptive re-use of existing buildings and the preservation of open space are options that must be fully and fairly explored if a responsible judgment on the Willowbrook land is to be made.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, who has her district office at the developmental center, has suggested that existing buildings could be adapted for use either as office space or as housing for the elderly. Other potential uses undoubtedly could be identified if a serious effort to do so were made.

And what of the center's open space? State-owned athletic fields now highly utilized by over a dozen sports groups would be destroyed under the sort of development plan advocated by the consultant. If there is anything this growing community needs, it's more athletic fields — not less.

State-owned land at Willowbrook also contains the largest stand of sugar maple trees on the Island and the borough's only wild-growing sycamore trees, as well as a brook that's part of a natural drainage system running through the Island's Greenbelt. While the consultant's report indicated that a 15-acre tract encompassing the brook and trees ought to be preserved, it must be recognized that additional open space surrounding the brook also serves as part of the natural drainage system.

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The impact of decisions involving the Willowbrook property quite clearly will be felt beyond the 330 acres of state-owned property, which is why Island elected officials and the borough's community boards must become actively involved — right now — in the decision-making process.

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