

# Editorial page

*Our opinion/*

STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE, Tuesday August 3, 1982

## 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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Adherence to the consultant's recommendation, for instance, could result in a population growth of from 3,000 to 4,000 persons in the very Mid-Island area subjected to an extraordinary level of residential development in recent years. Could schools in the area accommodate such growth? Could roads in the area handle the additional traffic? And what of the impact of further development on public recreational facilities in the area?

The latter point is worthy of particular examination. The only city recreational facility available to serve the growing communities around the state property is Willowbrook Park. But that park — as anyone who has visited it on a summer weekend knows — already is taxed to the limit; its athletic fields are in constant use, as are its picnicing facilities.

Development of the Willowbrook property as proposed by the consultant obviously would result in more potential users of Willowbrook Park. At the same time, sale and development of the state property would result in destruction of the athletic fields on the developmental center grounds. The Mid-Island area, in short, would be left with fewer recreational facilities for more people.

State officials must be compelled to view their decision on the Willowbrook property in the context of its overall impact on the Island. They must be made to recognize that open space — left either in its natural state or made available for recreational uses — is a valuable commodity in this fast-growing borough.

It should not be up to Mrs. Connelly alone to convince state officials that any sort of large-scale development on the Willowbrook property would be contrary to the Island's long-term interests. Every public official and community leader must join with the assemblywoman in her effort to ensure that the Island's needs are taken into account in disposition of the state land.