

Condo future for Willowbrook?

By MARY ENGELS

FOR SALE: 330 acres of prime property in the middle of the city's fastest growing borough, on site of former Staten Island Developmental Center at Willowbrook. Property ideal condominium conversion.

Although the above ad hasn't appeared yet, it may someday soon in light of a recent state study on the future of the Willowbrook site, which favored development while ignoring other potential uses.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, who chairs the state's Assembly Committee on Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, said that it has been the state's policy recently to get rid of properties that were formerly large institutions and put them back on the tax roles.

"WHAT WORRIES ME," Connelly said, "is that if we continue to get bad press at the center, even though under the consent decree it must be down to a population of 250 by 1985, there's nothing to stop the state from saying, 'Let's just close it down altogether.'"

She said that under the terms of the consent decree, it is not required that the center has to be maintained

in order to reach the 250 population figure.

The state study on the future of the 330-acre center was done by Gruen Associates for the Office of General Services.

"In recent months I have had several people come to me asking for the use of some portions of the property for such things as schools, recreation and parking," Connelly said. "Personally, I feel that recreation is very important. At present, 17 sporting leagues use the ball fields and this is one thing the study did not take into consideration.

"**THE FIELDS ARE** also used for the Special Olympics and the United Cerebral Palsy's Field Day and by the handicapped scouts. That's quite an oversight," she said.

Connelly also said that she would like to see use of existing buildings for some kind of senior housing.

"Old people need a place to live and the center's campus would be ideal. In addition," she said, "there should also be some kind of community residences for the mentally handicapped.

"There's nothing that says they all have to be mainstreamed. Some, in fact, seem to prefer this kind of setting and if they are in an area that is secure, and this certainly could be

made that way, it would be the perfect place for them to come and go," she said.

"It's important that we maintain some type of mentally retarded units here, otherwise, we will have nothing in our borough for those who have to be institutionalized."

THE STUDY WEIGHED heavily in favor of development of condominiums on the land, stating it could hold a medium density of 1,200 to 1,600 units that would be expected to sell at the rate of 175 to 200 units a year.

Connelly said that what the state doesn't realize is that excessive development in this area already has caused severe flooding problems. "As they take away more and more land there will be more and more problems. Right now, Willowbrook property is a form of watershed for the flooding."

Another fear is that the property could become another Pilgrim State, where prisoners were sent to be housed in the same surroundings as the mentally retarded.

"It's a very real concern to me as I remember when the state officials were looking at this place at one point to house some of the Cuban boat people."

CONNELLY SAID THAT she is going to ask the Office of General Services to form a Staten Island Task Force to decide the future of the site.

"I had anticipated they would do so following the release of the study and its recommendations. Unfortunately, it hasn't happened so far. It should be done as soon as possible to try and clarify some of the issues that have arisen and to offset any future things the state may have planned for the property."

Originally, the state had proposed that Connelly and Sen. John Marchi be on the task force.

"I would also like to see someone from the environmental and business sectors, as well as the local community board, have input."

One of the most surprising findings in the study is that the property has some rare natural resources, including a 15-acre tract traversed by a brook that would suffer irreversible damage if developed. Known as Corson's Brook Woods, it contains the largest stand of sugar maples on Staten Island and is the only place where sycamore trees grow wild.

"It is clear we've got something very rare and valuable here, a large tract of relatively unspoiled land in the heart of an urban sprawl and it ought to remain the community resource it is now."