

Panel to consider future of Willowbrook land

By JOHN E. HURLEY

Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly announced today that an 11-member task force of state and civic officials is being formed to study the future of the 380-acre Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook.

Although Mrs. Connelly had recommended that such a task force be formed, she expressed some displeasure yesterday over the make-up of the panel as now

proposed, saying it should include more representatives from community groups such as the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences and the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, the latter a conservation group that first pointed out some of the property's important natural features.

But the final make-up of the task-force is still subject to change, according to Thomas Cooper, a spokesman for the Office of General Services (OGS).

The task force is being formed by invitation from state General Services Commissioner John Egan, whose agency will take possession of almost all the Willowbrook property when the developmental center consolidates its operations to a small tract on the 64-building campus.

That is now scheduled to occur sometime in 1985, when the center's patient population is re-

duced from its current 1,750 to about 250 under a federal court order requiring their placement in the community.

But officials of the state office have said that the future of the excessed Willowbrook land might be decided within the next year.

Last July, the state office released a study prepared by Gruen Associates that said condominiums or commercial office space would be the most profitable uses for the property.

But Mrs. Connelly, whose concerns over the land's future first prompted the state to commission the study, criticized the proposal for taking what she called a "money outweighs everything" approach and ignoring the benefits of preserving the land's natural features. Among those are Corson's Brook Woods, which contains the largest stand of sugar maples on the Island and

the only place in the borough where sycamore trees are known to grow wild.

OGS spokesman Cooper said yesterday that he thinks the panel will carry "a considerable amount of weight" in deciding the final disposition of the property by his agency.

"We're certainly not empaneling a group of this type as a mere

exercise," he said. "It's far more valuable for us to have their input than for us to make some arbitrary decision that would not reflect the views of the local community."

Mrs. Connelly has said she favors restoration of existing buildings and preservation of the campus' open spaces and woodlands, possibly as housing for the elderly.

As currently proposed by Egan, the 11-member task force would include Borough President Anthony Gaeta, State Sen. John Marchi, representatives from the City Planning Office, the mayor's and governor's offices, and state representatives from the Office of General Services, Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, and the state Budget Office.

The panel would also include a

member of Community Board 2 and the Staten Island Chamber of Commerce.

The first meeting of the task force is tentatively scheduled for mid-November. State OGS officials say they hope the panel can produce a report in six to eight months.

Before that happens, Mrs. Connelly says she hopes to have the task force members take a thorough tour of the Willowbrook campus (on which her own office is located), including its more isolated spots.

"I need not remind you how concerned Staten Islanders are that the future of this valuable piece of property be carefully planned," she told Egan in a recent letter. "Borough residents have seen too much slipshod development result in too many problems from flooding to overcrowding to traffic to the loss of irreplaceable natural resources."