

Developmental center may close



Gov. Mario Cuomo

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ALBANY — Efforts to close Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook should receive high priority this year, Gov. Mario M. Cuomo is urging today in his annual address to the Legislature.

Cuomo says in his "state of the state" message that by doing so, he seeks to "mark the end of a regrettable chapter in the treatment of the mentally retarded."

In matters of statewide interest, Cuomo is calling for a \$50 million tax break for thousands of senior citizens receiving Social Security benefits, and for another vote on a statewide Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which was defeated in 1975.

Other proposals to the lawmakers include job development programs and tuition-free education for approximately 600 Vietnam veterans enrolled full time in state universities.

As expected, Cuomo is also urging a boost in the legal drinking age from 19 to 21, part of what he calls an effort to combat drunk driving in cooperation with surrounding states.

State takeover of parole functions, now performed by localities, is another of Cuomo's proposals.

The speech, delivered at noon before a packed Assembly chamber, drew unusual attention in political circles, as the governor is a possible key figure at the Democratic presidential convention next summer, and all 211 state legislators face re-election next fall.

For his part, Republican Senate Majority Leader Warren Anderson of Binghamton issued a statement on the eve of the address challenging the governor to "consider resuming the program of tax reductions that was begun in 1976 at the initiative of the Senate and ... interrupted by Cuomo last year."

Anderson said the issues of crime, energy, education and the phase-out of various taxes next year have yet to be addressed.

"A year ago, Gov. Cuomo overreacted to our fiscal situation with a massive layoff of state workers and a threatened reduction of services to our taxpayers," Anderson said.

On the Willowbrook closing, Cuomo says he is directing his mental health aides "to submit a comprehensive plan" for "redirecting revenues" to care for the patients in other facilities.

"The planned census of 250 persons is so inefficient as to the use of the land and existing physical plant that the money required to renovate would be better used in the establishment of new smaller community-based facilities," he points out.

Timothy Russert, counsel to the governor, told the Advance last night that no jobs would be lost as a result of the final phase-out, which under court order is due in 1985. Previous layoffs have been a sore point at the facility.

Cuomo's remarks on the center represent no shift in the administration's policy, Russert said.

During the past few years, the planned movement of Willowbrook residents to smaller facilities has been delayed, and the state has applied for and gained extensions of the court-ordered Willowbrook Consent Decree of 1975.

Assembly Mental Health Committee Chairwoman Elizabeth A. Connelly of Staten Island said she does not know how, as a practical matter, the center could close this year, should that prove to be Cuomo's goal.

Russert said the closing is being sought "as soon as possible."

The governor vows he'll "work with appropriate local officials, civic groups, parents, union representatives and employees concerned."

At least part of the Willowbrook campus is one of the sites targeted by the administration for use as office space for state agencies moving out of the World Trade Center in Manhattan during the next five years.

Cuomo took pains to underline his concern for the mentally retarded and disabled.

More debate is expected on that issue Jan. 17, when Cuomo delivers his annual budget message, which is expected to deal with last year's painful cutbacks at facilities such as the Willowbrook center and South Beach Psychiatric Center, Ocean Breeze.

Cuomo said conditions at the former Willowbrook State School had been a "national symbol of neglect and callousness" toward the mentally retarded and disabled.

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