

SIDC's future still a big question

By JULIE MACK
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The future of the 53 buildings and 382 acres of land in Willowbrook comprising the Staten Island Developmental Center remains uncertain, despite Wednesday's vow by Gov. Mario M. Cuomo to close the center as an institution for the mentally retarded.

Future use of the property has been debated for the past several years, as the institution's population has been reduced from more than 6,000 in the early 1970s to about 1,000. Many of the buildings are already vacant.

The only impact of Cuomo's statement on the disposition of the property is that most of the facility will be eventually available for other types of development.

Previously, state officials planned to reduce the patient population to 250 and operate a smaller institution using 10 of the buildings.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly said the latest proposal from Cuomo's office is to build a 10- to 15-bed group home on the property, along with two intensive care facilities (ICF), which would each house between 25 and 50 multi-handicapped persons.

If that proposal is followed, it would free all 53 buildings and most of the land.

"There's no question that there have to be some decisions made about the property," Mrs. Connelly said. "A lot of people have made inquiries. A lot of recommendations have been made."

Thomas Cooper, spokesman for the state Office of General Services, which handles disposition of state property, said it is his understanding that Cuomo

will appoint a task force in the near future to study the matter.

A task force was attempted once before, in 1982, but its formation was derailed by that year's election.

"They were very hot on the idea of a task force," Mrs. Connelly said. "It was gung-ho for awhile, but the election came up and the idea was dropped. The task force has never convened."

One issue facing a task force is whether some state offices can be moved to the SIDC campus. The site was included in a five-year relocation plan for the 49 state agencies with offices now in the World Trade Center.

Although no agencies have been named, one possibility is the state Department of Environmental Conservation (EnCon), whose commissioner, Henry G. Williams, has expressed an interest in the Willowbrook site, according to Assemblyman Robert A. Straniero.

Cooper said that Willowbrook "could be viable site for EnCon, but I'm not aware that EnCon is being considered as one of the possibilities."

Others have suggested using the grounds for condominiums or townhouses, and development of the land for recreational use.

Mrs. Connelly acknowledged that as SIDC's closing approaches, the debate about the merits of different proposals will become more heated.

"I think it's going to be very difficult," she said. "But my thought is that the needs of the developmentally disabled should come first."