

Our opinion/

Whither Willowbrook?

Before anyone goes out and cheers Gov. Mario Cuomo for promising to close the Staten Island Developmental Center, two important questions need to be answered:

How, exactly, does the state intend to empty the institution? And what will it do with the center's 380 acres and 53 buildings once that is accomplished?

These are not idle questions. If Gov. Cuomo is serious about his commitment to the mentally retarded — and he does seem to be — then he should be concerned not only with emptying the developmental center per se but also with what will happen to the more than 1,000 residents there after the institution is closed.

Staten Islanders should also be concerned that the Willowbrook center not be closed only so the state can sell its land and create yet another big development of ugly, look-alike houses.

On the first point there is ample room for concern. The whole idea of closing the Willowbrook center, of course, is to improve care for the mentally retarded. Closing the center is not an end unto itself, only a means to the end of better care.

In recent years there has been some concern about where the remaining center residents can be placed. Some advocates for the retarded admit that the most profoundly retarded residents might not benefit at all by being placed in smaller community residents. For those people, some kind of institutional care may indeed be proper.

As for the others, there is the question of where they can go. Closing the Willowbrook institution is a good idea in principle. In practice, however, it hasn't been so easy. Because of the fierce resistance to group homes by most communities, it has been extremely difficult to find homes for the displaced Willowbrook residents.

The original Willowbrook Consent Decree of 1975 ordered the institution to reduce itself to 250 residents by 1981. When that proved impossible, the deadline was extended to 1985. Even that probably won't be met. A total shutdown of the center isn't scheduled until mid-1987.

It would be sheer fantasy if Mario Cuomo, or anyone else, thinks that closing the developmental center will be accomplished anytime soon.

Finally, there is the question of what to do with all that land once the center is closed. Several proposals have already been made — moving state office there from the World Trade Center, including it whole or in part within the proposed Greenbelt, or selling off the land to private developers.

The last option is the least desirable, but it is the one most often mentioned by state and city officials. In October 1982, an 11-member task force was formed to recommend what to do with the Willowbrook land and buildings. The task force was weighted heavily in the state's favor, with only four members from Staten Island. But the group fell apart before it could hold one meeting.

Meanwhile, we are left to wonder what will become of the developmental center once it is closed. Some combination of state offices within the existing buildings and preservation of the center's natural woodlands would be best. To date, the undeveloped portions of the center have not been included in the Greenbelt's proposed boundaries, but an advisory committee recently recommended doing so.

Gov. Cuomo's remarks about the developmental center show that his heart is in the right place, that he is concerned about care for the mentally retarded. But it is quite clear that the shutting down is only one step in an important process.