

*Our opinion/*

# There should be room for both these points

If we are to believe environmentalists and local mental health officials, the latest case for the handicapped comes down to one simple choice: Trees versus group homes.

It's a ridiculous, overly simplistic argument. There is ample room for discussion and compromise.

The issue arose last week when Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, Staten Island's largest environmental group, protested state plans to build two group homes for the retarded in an environmentally significant area called Corson's Brook, located in a wooded area at the rear of the Staten Island Developmental Center grounds.

The environmentalists say they are not arguing against group homes, but against developing an area they hope to incorporate into the Greenbelt.

They have a point. Corson's Brook is specifically mentioned in the City Planning Department's proposal for the Greenbelt. The developmental center is a huge piece of property, with many, many developed areas that could adequately serve as group home sites.

Particularly at this juncture, with creation of the Greenbelt park near the top of the Island's agenda, it would be a mistake to make plans for any potentially protected area.

If we are serious about protecting the Greenbelt, then the line against development must be drawn somewhere, and Corson's Brook is as good a place as any to start. The state should make every accommodation possible to spare the area from being destroyed, even slightly.

On the other hand, James Walsh, the developmental center director, also has a point. He says one reason he needs to put group homes on state property is because he meets vehement opposition whenever he tries to put a group home in the community.

Ironically, one of the leading protesters against developing Corson's Brook also led a fight against a group home in Eltingville last year. The woman says the two issues are unrelated. She also defends the stance she took last year by noting that she only became upset when officials proposed a second group home in her neighborhood.

Perhaps it is unfair that this neighborhood was asked to accept two group homes, but the demand for group homes is growing tremendously and it will continue to grow as the state empties large institutions like the developmental center and makes more humane provisions for the handicapped.

There undoubtedly will come a time when every neighborhood will have not only one but several group homes. That may not seem like a welcome idea to many community activists, but it is reality.

If community residents want to put constraints on the number of group homes in a particular neighborhood, then they must accept the consequences. In this case, the consequence is placing the group homes elsewhere -- and that elsewhere could very well be on undeveloped state property.

On Staten Island, as elsewhere, accommodations must be made for a variety of interests. In this instance, the need for group homes is compelling, but not so compelling or immediate to justify the proposed encroachment into Corson's Brook.

There are still plenty of areas where group homes could be built without destroying woodlands, including alternate sites at the developmental center. If the environmentalists are serious about their protests, they will help the mental health officials find such a site, instead of simply protesting the one that was proposed.