

# SIDC panel to consider group homes

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A proposal to build four group homes on a land described by environmentalists as a natural preserve will be among the issues confronting a newly formed task force on the future of the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC).

SIDC Director James Walsh indicated yesterday he is still promoting his plan to keep an L-shaped parcel of land for group homes for the mentally retarded, which would allow the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) to give up the remainder of the 382-acre campus.

Walsh talked about the plan yesterday while leading a tour of the grounds for the Advance Editorial Board.

OMRDD has controlled the property for 30 years while operating an institution for the mentally retarded. At one time, more than 6,000 residents were housed in its 53 buildings. The population is now 858 — a number that has increased in recent months as SIDC assumed control of patients which have been under the aegis of United Cerebral Palsy of New York State.

The last group of UCP patients were transferred to state control today. The transfer occurred as part of a settlement to keep UCP from bankruptcy.

With the transfer of UCP patients completed, Walsh said his goal now is to continue moving patients from SIDC into group homes, in an effort to empty the institution.

Gov. Mario M. Cuomo an-

nounced in January his intention to close down the SIDC. Subsequently, OMRDD said it would abandon the facility by the end of 1987. Most of the remaining patients will be placed throughout the state, leaving only about 75 native Islanders.

Walsh proposes to house the Islanders in four group homes to be built on a wooded four-acre parcel on the eastern edge of the campus. The undeveloped parcel borders Forest Hill Road on the east, the Institute for Basic Research in Mental Retardation on the north, and former SIDC staff residences, now group homes, on the south.

The Protectors of the Pine Oak Woods, the Island's largest environmental group, have criticized the plan, saying the site is part of the 40-acre Corson's Brook Woods, which is designated for inclusion in the Greenbelt. The group says any development would destroy an invaluable natural resource.

Walsh said he met with the environmental group last month to hear its concerns, but has not changed his proposal. Walsh said the group homes would affect only a small portion of the property and would protect the remainder by sealing it off from further development.

Moreover, Walsh said the site links the Institute for Basic Research and the current group homes, and using it would consolidate the agency's remaining operations in one corner of the campus.

The remaining 300 acres and more than 40 brick buildings could then be adapted to new uses, Walsh said.

Numerous recommendations on uses for the property have been made in the last several years. Athletic groups are eager to retain the property's ballfields; others want a community center offering services for the handicapped as well as recreation for the general public; developers see the area as a prime spot for new homes, and environmentalists would like to protect the area's extensive woodlands.

In addition, state officials have suggested that the existing buildings could be adapted as

offices for state agencies moving out of the World Trade Center. Another suggestion is using the property to consolidate the College of Staten Island, which currently has two campuses.

Walsh noted that the brick buildings are structurally solid; so solid, in fact, that it may cost the state more to demolish them than it did to build them in the late 1930s.

However, any use of the buildings would require extensive renovation of their antiquated heating and plumbing systems, he said.

Responsibility for disposition of the property rests with the state General Services Department, headed by John C. Egan. General Services organized the task force.

Consisting of 13 state and local officials, the task force will meet for the first time tomorrow.

In addition to Egan, officials on the task force are Henrik Duflea, director of state operations; Michael Finnerty, state budget director, and Arthur Webb, commissioner of the OMRDD.

Island officials on the committee are Borough President Anthony Gaeta; Marilyn Mammano, Staten Island director of the City Planning Department; Philip Scampas, land use committee chairman for Community Board 2; Assemblyman Eric N. Vitaliano; Assemblyman Robert A. Straniere, and Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly.

Other Island representatives are John Oppenheimer, chairman of the environmental science department at the College of Staten Island; Frank Scarangelo, chairman of the Staten Island Chamber of Commerce, and Genevieve Benoit, chairman of the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Council.

The Advance Editorial Board for this meeting consisted of Editor Les Trautmann, Associate Editor William Huus, City Editor Brian Laline, Sports Editor Larry Miraldi, editorial writer Marc Davis and reporter Julie Mack.

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