

What path will state take on SIDC property?

By JULIE MACK
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As serious deliberations begin on the fate of the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) property, state officials appear committed to satisfying local interests in redeveloping the site.

"This administration is very sensitive to community concerns," said James Gallagher, director of real property for the state Office of General Services. "They are looking for a community consensus."

That concern comes straight from the governor's office, according to General Services Commissioner John C. Egan, who told a 13-member task force that Gov. Mario M. Cuomo wants the land redeveloped to best fit the needs of Staten Island — not the needs of New York State or New York City.

"For that reason, we have emphasized local representation for input on this community's needs and concerns," Egan said.

The state's approach appears to give tremendous leeway to the task force, which met for the first time this month. The group, which includes nine local representatives as well as the heads of four state agencies, is expected to have an interim report on the property's future by September and a final report prepared by the end of the year.

The report will include recommendations on almost 300 acres and more than 40 brick buildings which will remain after the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) shuts down the center, which has housed the mentally retarded for almost 30 years.

The institution, which once had more than 6,000 patients, now has 850 people who will be placed in group homes around the state during the next three years. The institution is scheduled to close by the end of 1987.

OMRDD will retain control of 90 acres in the southeast corner of the property, which contains the state Institute for Basic Research in Mental Retardation and more than a half-dozen small buildings used as group homes and program facilities. The state also plans to build four more group homes.

The land that OMRDD is returning to the state Office of General Services is prime property, with a central location and natural characteristics that make it worth millions of dollars. Local interest in the property is intense, a fact reflected by the strong convictions of community representatives on the task force, including a college professor; a Community Board 2 member; Borough President Anthony Gaeta; Marilyn Mammano, Island director of the City Planning Department; Chamber of Commerce President Frank Scarangelo; an advocate for the handicapped, and the Island's three state Assembly members.

One of the main concerns of the local representatives is protecting the land from private developers who would turn the property into row houses.

"One thing we don't need is more urban sprawl in the form of housing," Assemblyman Eric N. Vitaliano said. "The first thing we should be doing is developing the land for another public purpose."

Vitaliano supports suggestions by Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly and Genevieve Benoit, chairwoman of the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council, to use part of the property for recreational facilities for the handicapped.

"I've been talking with the local groups (for the handicapped)," Mrs. Connelly said, "and we concur that this is probably the only opportunity to assure placement of things not available now in the community.

"The first thing is a swimming pool, which is so important in therapy of handicapped persons and is something they can really get pleasure from."

Demand for other pool facilities on the Island is so heavy that they can not accommodate the handicapped, Mrs. Connelly said. She envisions an Olympic-size pool that would be open to the public, but give priority to the disabled.

Mrs. Connelly and Ms. Benoit also suggested the construction of other facilities, such as a running track and gymnasium.

While some people are proposing a park for the land, the City Planning Department is pushing for a natural preserve. The department is interested in preserving the property's natural woodlands, which include a 40-acre tract called Corson's Brook Woods that has been designated for inclusion in the Greenbelt.

Local environmentalists have made no secret of their desire to set aside Corson's Brook Woods as a natural preserve, and they have two proponents on the task force — John Oppenheimer, head of the environmental science program at College of Staten Island, and Ms. Mammano, Island director of the City Planning Department.

However, debate over the future Corson's Brook Woods may be stifled, since the woods are part of the 90 acres to be retained by OMRDD, and the task force is only dealing with the other 300 acres. OMRDD has promised to preserve all but four acres of Corson's Brook Woods, but the environmentalists are still skeptical. "We still feel the discussion needs to go on," Ms. Mammano said.

Another proposal, initiated by state Sen. John J. Marchi, would be to use the SIDC property to consolidate the two campuses of the College of Staten Island.

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Although the college is currently evaluating a site in Ocean Breeze, the state Budget Division reportedly is supporting Marchi's proposal because of the apparent savings in construction costs at the SIDC site. The center already has more than 40 brick buildings, according to Egan. And the buildings and surrounding property already resemble a college setting.

Moreover, members of the task force say turning the property into a college campus would be compatible with the other suggestions. "If CSI goes in there, that would be bulk, but within a university setting you could easily accommodate sports and cultural facilities," said Assemblyman Robert A. Straniere.

The big question is whether CSI officials will agree to such a proposal. Both Straniere and Marchi plan to consult with college officials within the next few weeks.

"If the college is not interested, I want to know right now so we can give attention to other uses," Straniere said, adding that he would not push the idea without the support of CSI.

When the task force meets again June 7 at the SIDC, it is expected that discussion will begin in earnest on the various proposals. And local representatives say they expect state officials to take their ideas seriously.

"The bottom line is that if they seek the community's advice, I think they would be very, very reluctant to ignore it," Vitaliano said.

Moreover, Vitaliano said, the state's intentions to seek community approval seems sincere. Like several others, he noted that Egan, OMRDD Commissioner Arthur Webb and Henrik N. Dullea, director of state operations, plus several of their aides, made the trip from Albany to the SIDC for the first task force meeting.

"I was very impressed," Straniere said. "Frankly, I thought all the department heads would have representatives there."

"Their presence was not lost on us," Vitaliano said. "The only thing that points to pessimism at this point is if your cynicism is at such a level that you disbelieve everything that has been heard and seen so far."