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Sense and SIDC planning

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Events came fast and furious in 1975 concerning the future of Willowbrook State School and its 5,000 disabled residents. The state was agreeing to change its entire philosophy on care for the handicapped, and was pledging to pump millions of dollars of taxpayer money into a system of community care.

As the Advance reporter covering these events — stories with national implications — there were more questions than answers. People came first, of course, and the looming issue revolved around adequate health care for the thousands of disabled residents.

But in the back of my mind was always the question, what would happen to the 380 acres of Willowbrook State School when the state reduced its population. As a snooping reporter, I had often prowled the grounds in search of stories, sneaking into buildings, looking through windows, meeting parents, employees and legislators.

And I had discovered beautiful open fields, where I jogged with a few sources, and wooded tracts which I criss-crossed on my way to interviews. I feared the great land grab — public property, no longer needed, being put up for auction to the highest bidder who would then line this lucrative area with house after house.

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The state has convened a task force which will mean that a public discussion will take place to answer that question, and that is good. State officials say that the community will decide what to do with the property, and that, too, bodes well for keeping the ballfields, preserving the forests, and developing recreational uses for the disabled and the community on the rest of the property.

What troubles one cynical reporter, however, are the comments from SIDC's leadership about the Corson's Brook Woods, a thickly forested area which abuts Forest Hill Road. It is property the state says it intends to keep.

And it is property on which it says it wants to build four group homes, facing Forest Hill Road, and extending into the woods.

This state recommendation to build comes despite the fact that its own consultant, Gruen Associates, to whom it paid thousands of dollars of taxpayer money, said the area was a rare, precious treasure, and despite the fact that the City Planning Commission had asked that this

area be preserved as part of the Staten Island Greenbelt park.

One can only hope that the state will listen more attentively to the task force now convened to decide the property's future, than it has thus far to the people who know the importance of this woods.

Along with whether Corson's Brook Woods should be disturbed is a more paramount issue, whether these group homes represent quality community placements. Oh, yes, they meet the letter of the law, they qualify under the 1975 court judgment to which the state agreed.

But do they meet the spirit of that agreement? Would these homes give the disabled a chance to live in a home-like, safe environment, to develop fully and freely? Would the car fumes, the noisy, speeding automobiles of Forest Hill Road make it a danger for a resident to step out of the front door?

There is no doubt that an argument can be made against most every effort to develop a group home in a neighborhood. On Tysen Street in New Brigh-

ton, people said they hadn't been properly notified, on Emerson Hill people claimed the streets were too narrow for emergency vehicles, in Dongan Hills there were too many schools nearby, in Annadale there were too many other group homes. The list is long.

But at the SIDC-Forest Hill Road site a solution is simple, and we can go further than just saying no to Corson's Brook Woods.

Adjacent to Corson's Brook Woods on the SIDC property is a winding street with brick houses that were formerly physicians' residences. Opposite these houses, still near Forest Hill Road, is open space where four homes could be built, with large yards in a safe environment.

Technically, these houses wouldn't qualify as "community placement," but this just happens to represent a better place to live, at least as I see it, than on Forest Hill Road. That sentiment was shared by many parents I've interviewed in the past.

If the state is serious in its commitment to the disabled, and wants to preserve the beautiful wooded tracts it has long protected, it will investigate this common-sense alternative.

(While an Advance reporter, Robert Miraldi received awards for his news coverage of the disabled and of the environment. He now teaches journalism at the State University of New York at New Paltz.)