

Staten Island

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Willowbrook site: A complex choice

By MARY ENGELS

BY EARLY SEPTEMBER, a plan proposed by members of the Staten Island Developmental Center Advisory Council dealing with the future of the center—the site of the former Willowbrook State Hospital—must be on Gov. Cuomo's desk so he can evaluate it and make a decision on the future of the complex.

Joseph Stellato, a member of the New York State Office of General Services, stressed the urgency of the situation—"which the governor has imposed on my commission"—to the council this past week at a meeting in the center's board room.

But, he said, "six weeks is tough" to evaluate some 21 proposals for reuse of the almost 300 acres at Willowbrook, which will be up "for grabs" once the 1987 deadline is reached to phase out the old center.

Nevertheless, Stellato said, "a good working document must be finished in time for the September deadline."

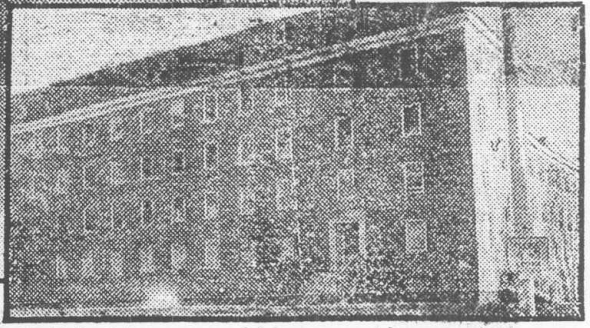
For the past few months, the advisory council—consisting of local legislators, city planners, community board people, John Egan, commissioner of General Services, and Arthur Webb, commissioner of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental—has been meeting to discuss the best possible use of the property.

They have also been seeking community input for uses of the site when the state phases out the center.

Suggestions have run the gamut from senior citizen housing to recreational facilities for the handicapped, from a permanent facility for local theater groups to a maintenance center for state vehicles.



Staten Island Developmental Center director James Walsh (l.). Below, typical living quarters at center.



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Leading the field, however, is use of the grounds and many of the buildings for a college campus—The College of Staten Island's new campus, to be exact.

THIS IS CLOSELY followed by requests for the property to be absorbed as part of the Greenbelt on which it borders.

The Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, Staten Island's largest conservation group—who consider “the developmental center property as part of the Staten Island Greenbelt”—even urged last week that the excess land be used for a consolidated campus for The College of Staten Island.

At the meeting, Ellen Pratt, a member of the Protectors, stressed that the center property “must remain a public resource for the continuing benefit of the public.”

The group has asked that about 95 acres of the property be added to Willowbrook Park, a city park which is adjacent to the center.

City University chancellor Joseph Murphy, in a letter to Egan, expressed a “definite interest” in the possibility of relocating the new consolidated campus to the Staten Island Developmental Center grounds.

At last week's meeting, Raymond

Koloski of OGS, noted that he and others on the staff had met with college officials earlier in the day to discuss the specifics of their proposal.

WE ASKED FOR a preliminary report from the college within two weeks. We want them to give us an indication and extent of their interest and desirability in relocating to the Willowbrook property,” Koloski said.

Dr. Edmund Volpe, the college president, confirmed Koloski's statement.

“With the understanding that the SIDC property will be available to us within a reasonable amount of time, it is certainly the primary site in which the college would be interested in for its consolidated campus,” Volpe said.

“We have been asked to ascertain what portions of the land and perhaps the existing buildings would be suitable for educational purposes and we will instruct our consultants to complete that process by the first week of August, at which time we will share those results with Egan's task force,” said Volpe.

“It is our feeling that the Willowbrook site is more immediately developable than the current site available to us in Ocean Breeze. In addition, we anticipate that the building of the campus at Willowbrook would prove a significant saving over the site development at Ocean Breeze.”

According to engineering reports already prepared by the college, it would cost \$30 million just to prepare the site pilings and concrete cover at Ocean Breeze if the college were to build there.

A campus architect looking at the buildings at the developmental center noted that sewer lines are in as well as underground utilities and there is a usable roadway system.

Considering that the cost of the college is tagged at roughly \$230 million, more than \$30 million would be a significant savings.

JAMES WALSH, director of the Staten Island Developmental Center, said his people are still proceeding with plans to phase out the complex by 1987 and to build a one-storied ranch type style facility for about 72 residents in an area of the property adjacent to the Institute for Basic Research and Development.

Altogether, there will still be about 150 residents at what will be a mini-Staten Island Developmental Center based on about 90 acres of the 387 acres of property.

“The population will all be Staten Islanders, both in the new facility and in the nearby group residences which are on the property,” he said.

Current population of the center is about 800, a far cry from the more than 5,000 mentally retarded and developmentally disabled clients of more than a decade ago.

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