

# Leagues to be booted from SIDC?

## Land allocation could leave youths

## without place to play

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Imagine a recreation facility used by as many as 20,000 people a year, and enjoyed by thousands more. Local residents don't have to imagine that now, because they have Willowbrook Park and the land surrounding the Staten Island Developmental Center.

But Islanders may have to use their imaginations soon, because the dozens of acres that are now used for recreation may soon be gobbled up by New York State's reorganization of the 382-acre area.

"If everyone had to move

from the fields here it would be a disaster," Jim Savage, president of the Staten Island Soccer League, said. "I can't think of a worse thing to happen to the youth of Staten Island."

A special state task force is expected to recommend plans to Gov. Mario M. Cuomo to allocate the land at the SIDC site. A small parcel of land will be retained for the state Office of Mental Retardation to house about 300 of the most severely retarded.

Willowbrook Park is one of only four public recreation

parks (the others are Clove Lakes, Walker and Schmul) serving the densely populated North Shore of Staten Island. But with six ballfields and an archery range, Willowbrook Park is already taxed to its limits.

After the land allocated to handle the retarded, the rest of the land is up for grabs. There are several takers, among them the College of Staten Island, which is interested in the lion's share (about 160 acres) to combine its two existing campus sites there.

All of this speculation about what will happen to the land has

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# SIDC

left recreation league sponsors to wonder what the effect will be on their group — if they can survive.

"I'd hate to think that we would have to close," said Al Sedita, head of the New Springville Little League, "but we may have no choice."

Leaders of the New Springville circuit, which has created and maintained three fields at the corner of the property adjacent to the research center, are worried that there may be no place for them to go if there is no room at Willowbrook.

"Look at our position," Sedita asked. "We've spent 11 years building up a good activity for 500 kids. With all of the new families moving into New Springville, we have a tremendous potential for growth, but we can't expand because we don't know what will happen to the land here."

"There's really no place else for us to go," Sedita added. "Everywhere else is full, and I don't think that we can afford to build a big enough complex. The losers are the kids."

"The state doesn't want to exclude legitimate interests," said John Collier, assistant to the state task force to dispose of the

SIDC, "and recreation activities in the community is certainly a legitimate interest."

No matter what Gov. Cuomo finally decides to do with the land, the league administrators say they would be happy with any solution. "Although we could do without a prison," Sedita said, as long as they all get to keep their fields.

"We have 4,000 kids who use three fields at Willowbrook on the weekends and practice fields all week long," Jim Savage said. "Leaving Willowbrook would really hurt the kids, because we would have to cut about 28 teams. Other fields are bursting at the seams. What Staten Island really needs are some more recreation fields, but I'd be happy to keep what we have."

Kids aren't the only ones affected by a possible eviction. Two fields owned by the SIDC are leased to the SAMSAN Softball League, which serves about 1,500 adults.

"I don't even want to think about losing these fields," SAMSAN's director, Fred Giordano, said. "I can't curtail the schedule — it's not fair to our sponsors — so I'd have to fold 16 to 24 teams."

"We've been using these fields since 1949 and we have never had a problem," Giordano said. "We're good neighbors, and we don't cost the state anything. In fact, we take better care of the facilities than they could. Being dispossessed would hurt everyone, and I hope we can find a solution."

Officials from various leagues around the Island say they may circulate petitions to help keep

the fields for use by the community. Another strategy includes asking the New York City Parks Department to obtain the lands and add it to the adjacent Greenbelt (the entire SIDC is bordered by Greenbelt lands); the best way to do that, many feel, is by pressuring local elected officials to leave their sections of the 382-acre area alone.

"Displacing all these kids and adults is like committing suicide," Sedita said. "We have to stand and fight on this issue."

The state knows that this is one dispute which has just begun, which is why it is trying to minimize the problem.

"No one really wants to touch the Greenbelt ... that's a major point that the recreation groups have going for them," Collier said. "Just as important, no one really wants to mess around with a bunch of youth leagues. After all, they don't hurt anyone, and I don't think that we'll hurt them."

James Walsh agrees with that assessment. Walsh, director of the developmental center, said the recreation leagues are "good neighbors."

"They've never given us any

trouble, and they are very cooperative," Walsh said. "They run clinics for some of our clients and give us money to send some of our handicapped kids to camp. They have really taken an interest in both the facilities here and the people who use them, and it would be a shame to ask them to leave."

Walsh's personal preference for distribution of the land includes a planned scouting resort for handicapped youths, which would still allow for plenty of room for the recreation leagues. "There are sufficient resources for both the handicapped and for community use," he said.

That's the same point the leagues are making, and they hope their plea to Albany is a successful one — because too many local youths can't afford the alternatives.

"No one really needs our land, so I hope the state doesn't give it away," Jim Savage said. "We took it for granted that Island kids would have a decent place for organized sports, and that was a mistake. I just hope that the state doesn't make a bigger mistake and kick us into the streets."

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Youngsters in the Staten Island Soccer League enjoy a game on a corner

of the wide-open space of the Staten Island Developmental Center.

Photo by Irving Silverstein

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