

Environmentalists stall group home project

SIDC ordered to show cause for tree removal on site

By JULIE MACK
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A local environmental organization returns to court tomorrow to prevent the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) from constructing four group homes on a tract city planners recommended for inclusion in the Greenbelt.

SIDC Director James Walsh was served yesterday with a show-cause order obtained by the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods to stop site clearance on part of Corson's Brook Woods.

The land, which is part of the SIDC property, is off Forest Hill Road, south of the Institute for Basic Research in Mental Retardation. The City Planning Commission recommended the area for inclusion in the Greenbelt.

In a February 1983 report, the commission said it considered Corson's Brook Woods "second only to Bloodroot Valley as the highest-quality undisturbed natural area remaining in Staten Island."

The show-cause order was granted by Supreme Court Justice Royal Radin on Sunday, a day after members of the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods discovered about 40 trees had been removed from the site, along with underbrush. The court order directs Walsh to respond to the environmental group's complaints, and demonstrate why he should not be ordered to halt construction.

Another 60 to 70 trees have been marked for removal in three of the 40 acres which make up Corson's Brook Woods, according to Richard Buegler, president of the Pine Oak Woods. "The result in this (three-acre) area is that three-quarters of the woodlands will be gone," Buegler said.

In a hearing tomorrow, Buegler will ask the court to force SIDC to consider alternative sites for the group homes.

But Walsh said feasibility studies already have been done on two other sites at SIDC, and both proved impractical for the two 12-bed and two 24-bed facilities planned. The facilities are to house multi-handicapped, mentally retarded clients.

"I feel very confident that the (show-cause) order will be vacated," Walsh said, adding that the SIDC will probably be represented by the state attorney general's office in court tomorrow.

Walsh said there is nothing illegal about building on the site. "In the court document, which is based on what Buegler told the court, there is no evidence of illegality," Walsh said. "They (the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods) just don't like the fact that we are building there."

Controversy over the site erupted in March, when Protectors of Pine Oak Woods discovered that SIDC planned to build the group homes there. At the time, Walsh said the site was selected because it was the only area of the SIDC campus which adjoins a residential neighborhood — an important factor in integrating group home residents into a community.

Moreover, Walsh said only four of the 40 acres of the woodland tract would be disturbed. He said the SIDC would not develop the remainder of the tract.

To placate detractors, Arthur Webb, commissioner of the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), which oversees the SIDC, said last summer that SIDC would discuss the proposal with community officials, even though local approval was not required.

Walsh appeared before Community Board 2 in September and outlined his building proposal. Philip Scampas, chairman of the board's land use committee, said the board supported the plan.

"There were some questions and Mr. Walsh answered them," Scampas said. "He assured us that a minimal amount of trees will be removed. I thought they were very nice that they came to us and filled us in completely — they didn't have to do that."

Scampas added that the board has not received any complaints from the community about the group home proposal.

Gerald McLaughlin, press secretary for state Sen. John Marchi, said money has already been appropriated for the homes and OMRDD is within its right to build them.

McLaughlin said Marchi made an agreement last spring with OMRDD to clear future projects with interested state and local officials. That agreement did not extend to the Corson's Woods project, which was already on the books, although McLaughlin said he did not realize that at the time.