

City joins fight to stop building in Greenbelt area

By JULIE MACK
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A temporary injunction to prevent the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) from building in Corson's Brook Woods was extended yesterday after the city Parks and Recreation Department joined a local environmental group in opposing the work.

Representing the parks department, Priscilla Lundin, assistant city corporation counsel, said in a court hearing yesterday that the city has "an extremely strong interest in the case" and requested the extension so "we have an opportunity to review our legal options."

The City Planning Department is also considering participating in the case, said Marilyn Mammano, Island planning director.

The parks department joins the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, which obtained the restraining order Sunday after members found work crews in the process of removing about 100 trees from a three-acre area, part of the 40-acre woodland tract which had been proposed for inclusion in the Greenbelt.

About 40 trees were cut before the restraining order was issued; no work has been done on the site since.

In yesterday's hearing, Supreme Court Justice Norman Felig extended the restraining order until Tuesday, when the two sides will meet again in court.

However, Parks Commissioner Henry Stern and SIDC Director James Walsh, both in the courtroom yesterday, plan to meet before then in hopes of hammering out an agreement.

At issue is construction on three acres of Corson's Brook Woods, which is off Forest Hill Road south of the Institute of Basic Research in Mental Retardation. The land is part of the SIDC property, although it has never been developed. Walsh

wants to build two 12-bed and two 24-bed group homes to serve multi-handicapped, mentally retarded clients.

However, a 1983 City Planning Department report called the woods "second only to Bloodroot Valley as the highest-quality undisturbed natural area remaining on Staten Island." That same report tagged Corson's Brook Woods for inclusion in the Greenbelt as a natural preserve.

To that end, the planning and parks departments last summer asked the state to either transfer the property to the Parks and Recreation Department or allow the department to administer the land. The application was made to a task force, headed by state General Services Commissioner John Egan, studying the disposition of excess SIDC property. No decision on the application has been announced yet.

Jane Cleaver, of the Island parks department office, said her agency feels SIDC is moving prematurely on building at Corson's Brook Woods when the city's application has not yet been answered. Moreover, she said, the city wants SIDC to work with their office in developing an appropriate, alternate site for the group homes.

But Walsh, and his superiors, have said repeatedly that Corson's Brook Woods is not part of the property available for disposition. Walsh also argues that SIDC is doing nothing illegal — that it simply wants to build on

its own land. In addition, he says feasibility studies on other areas of the SIDC property show that Corson's Brook Woods is the only practical location for the group homes.

Lawyers for SIDC — which is being represented by the state attorney general's office as well as its own legal office — say the group homes must be built soon because of a federal court mandate ordering SIDC to lower its

patient population as quickly as possible.

"It's a great possibility if we are prevented from building that we will be found in contempt in federal court," said Leonard Postiglione, SIDC attorney.

Postiglione said if the SIDC cannot break ground for construction before winter, it will have to delay the project until spring. "Time is of the essence in this matter," he added.