

*Our opinion/*

# A secret assault on the public's land

Environmentalists' worst fears have been realized. Despite reassurances just eight months ago that construction was not imminent, construction has indeed begun at the environmentally sensitive Corson's Brook Woods.

Not only is it the wrong action in the wrong place, but the state's attitude throughout has been somewhat arrogant and deceitful.

Back in March, environmentalists became angered over plans to build four group homes on the Corson's Brook site, and understandably so. The property, which is part of the Staten Island Developmental Center, is considered one of the finest wooded areas on the Island, and the City Planning Commission recommended last year that its entire 40 acres be included in the proposed Greenbelt park.

State officials knew this when they made plans to build on the site. And they knew what kind of opposition to expect when the furor arose in March. Nevertheless, they insisted at the time that the protests were premature and possibly even unnecessary.

A spokesman for state Sen. John Marchi, for example, said he would not approve funding for the development "until we get more details and until the community has a chance to respond."

Details never did become available, and the community never did have a chance to respond, except for one unannounced community board meeting. In fact, the cutting of trees began last week without any warning.

Also in March, Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly assured the protesters that "Nothing is settled yet. The site selection has not even been done."

It is now apparent, however, that the developmental center knew all along, and certainly by March, exactly where it wanted to build the group homes. It was simply trying to soothe the environmentalists and the state legislators with

calm talk.

James Walsh, director of the development center, insists that a feasibility study shows Corson's Brook is the only site upon which the group homes could be built. That study, however, in its entirety, consists of two pages.

It is hard to imagine how any comprehensive study of the three potential sites could have been accomplished in just two scant pages. If anything, it indicates that the state had already made up its mind and had issued the study to justify its predisposition.

But even getting that study was no easy task. At a meeting last Monday, the state at first forbid city Parks Commissioner Henry Stern from seeing the study, on the feeble grounds that it did not want to release the document at "such a public meeting."

Funny, but we had always thought that the state is the public, that it is in business for the public good, and that the public is entitled to know how decisions made in its name are arrived at. Despite its eventual backing down, the state's initial reluctance to publicly release the feasibility study was simply arrogant.

All other issues—aside, Corson's Brook Woods should never have been touched, and certainly not without first consulting the city Parks Department, to which the site is to be transferred for inclusion in the Greenbelt.

We said it before, during the commotion in March, and we now say it again: If we are serious about preserving the Greenbelt, we must stand up and say, loudly, enough is enough. There must be no encroachment on the Greenbelt, not even a little bit here and there at the edges.

If our own government does not respect the Greenbelt and its special significance to Staten Islanders, what hope do we have that anyone else will respect it?