

# State won't back down on homes

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Talks between state and city officials on the building of four group homes in Corson's Brook Woods ended yesterday after the first session when a state commissioner said he will not bow to demands to find another site for the proposed complex.

Arthur Webb, commissioner of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), told city officials he

intends to build the homes, tentatively called the Richmond Complex, despite opposition from environmentalists and the city parks and planning departments.

Environmentalists claim that building the homes in Corson's Brook Woods, located along Forest Hill Road in Willowbrook, would destroy one of the most "environmentally significant" woodlands on Staten Island. Although the land is state-owned

as part of the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC), the city has tagged the 40-acre woodland tract for inclusion in the Greenbelt.

In a separate development yesterday, a Staten Island consortium of advocacy groups for the retarded voiced their support for the homes, which would serve 74 mentally retarded adults, and pledged to let environmentalists "know that they can't just run rough-shod over

the developmentally disabled."

A battle over the group homes has been raging since early November when the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, a local environmental group, discovered workers clearing a four-acre site in Corson's Brook Woods.

The Protectors took the matter to court, first obtaining a temporary injunction to stop site clearance and then asking acting state Supreme Court Justice Rose McBrien for a permanent

injunction to force the relocation of the group homes. The court case is still pending.

The city Parks Department initially joined the Protectors in their suit against the state, but backed down from requesting a permanent injunction in hopes of resolving the matter through negotiation.

Negotiation was the point of yesterday's meeting in Manhattan between Webb and city officials, including Parks

Commissioner Henry Stern and Marilyn Mammano, Island planning director.

James Walsh, director of the Staten Island Developmental Center and creator of the group home proposal, said the meeting was "very positive and more information was shared between both sides. But Commissioner Webb has decided to go ahead with our plan."

Stern said the meeting was

"very polite but Webb essentially said that he made his decision a year ago and he wasn't going to change.

"I'm disappointed, but I'm not surprised," Stern added.

Stern said his agency will "take the matter further" but "I'm not saying exactly what we are going to do."

Walsh said construction on the homes cannot proceed until the court case is settled. "We are awaiting the legal decision and trying to keep our options open," he said. However, he said no further meetings between state and city officials are planned.

At yesterday's meeting of the Staten Island Regional Retarda-

tion and Disabilities Council, members expressed their dismay over attempts to relocate the group homes, which were initially proposed more than two years ago. The opening of the homes — two 12-bed and two 24-bed facilities — would be the final step in SIDC's deinstitutionalization program.

The institution is scheduled to close in 1987. The vast majority of its 1,000 patients will be placed in community residences in the boroughs where they live, and the four group homes would serve those SIDC patients from Staten Island.

Kevin Sullivan of the Association for Children with Retarded Mental Development said he fears a delay in building the

homes and completing deinstitutionalization would set back expansion of community-based services, since the state has said it must concentrate first on closing down SIDC.

"I think the council needs to be very vocal about the need to build that complex," he said.

Genevieve Benoit, director of A Very Special Place, an agency that provides services for developmentally disabled adults, agreed that "there has to be an outcry telling our side of the story.

"We want to preserve trees," she said. "And maybe Corson's Brook is incredibly important to the environment. But the question is, if the homes don't go there, where do they go?"