

# Advocates claim trees only a smokescreen

Advocates for Staten Island's mentally retarded said yesterday that they think prejudice against the handicapped is an issue in the controversy surrounding the construction of group homes in Corson's Brook Woods.

"I think this is a conspiracy to block housing for the disabled," said Polly Panzella of Westleigh, who has a handicapped son. "It's being done in a very nice way, but it's also very devious."

"Trees can be replanted," said Lorraine Horenberg, another parent of a handicapped son. "They want to save those trees because they don't want to have to look at our kids."

Mrs. Panzella was referring to opposition over the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) plan to build four group homes in Corson's Brook Woods, a 40-acre woodland tract along Forest Hill Road in Willowbrook. Environmentalists and city officials, who claim the land contains one of the most "environmentally significant" woodlands on Staten Island, have demanded that the group home project be relocated.

The problems surrounding the group home construction were the main topic of discussion at yesterday's monthly meeting at the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Council (SIRRDC), a consortium of Island agencies and consumers.

"I don't think the people with Protectors of Pine Oak Woods (a local environmental group leading the campaign against the construction) are viciously going

out against group homes," said Genevieve Benoit, director of A Very Special Place, a New Dorp agency offering developmentally disabled individuals special day treatment and recreational evening programs.

But she and other SIRRDC members said bias against the handicapped is a definite factor.

Ms. Benoit noted that someone recently bulldozed trees from another area of the SIDC campus located only a few hundred feet from Corson's Brook Woods. But in this case, the trees were apparently bulldozed — without the state's permission — to create new ballfields for the New Springville Little League, which already maintains several fields on the site.

"Where were the Protectors when those trees were bulldozed?" Ms. Benoit said.

Moreover, Diane Bugioli of A Very Special Place noted that in a plan submitted to a state task force, the Protectors recommend that all the existing woodlands on the SIDC property become park land or a natural preserve, and the remainder of the campus be turned over to the College of Staten Island, which has expressed interest in developing a campus on the site.

She said that under the Protectors' plan, the only service for the retarded would be an environmental program operated by the college. "I think that is despicable," Ms. Bugioli said. "I've never seen such audacity in my life.

"Here we sit and listen to families with multi-handicapped

children who have to send these kids to Rhode Island because there is no residential program located any closer. I can't believe these people think saving a tree is more important than relieving this kind of suffering."

Ms. Benoit noted that the Protectors' plan argues against a group home anywhere on the SIDC campus.

"According to them, there's not a place on campus without a building on it which isn't of incredible importance to the environment," she said.

Ms. Benoit said the group homes must be built in the woodlands along Forest Hill Road because that is the only part of the SIDC campus adjoining a residential neighborhood — an important factor in building a community residence for the retarded.

"But on the other hand, Corson's Brook is an important environmental area, and we can't forget that. We may have to give up Corson's Brook Woods. My concern is the rest of the property — that somehow they will be stopping us no matter where we go," Ms. Benoit said.

Herman Fishman, a parent, said he was disturbed by the "compassion they (objectors to the group homes) show for inanimate objects, especially when you are talking about promoting those inanimate objects at the expense of human beings who need a lot more help than they are getting now."

— JULIE MACK

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