

Homes for retarded await court ruling Conflict rages as both sides stand pat

By MARY ENGELS

Positions stiffened yesterday on the issue of stopping site clearance and forcing the relocation of planned group homes on state-owned land at the Staten Island Developmental Center (formerly Willowbrook).

"Since when are trees more important than people?" asked Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly (D-Staten Island) in the dispute over a court case initiated by the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods.

Connelly, who heads the Assembly Committee on Mental Health, declared, "If there is one place where the retarded shouldn't be pushed around, it is certainly on state land, especially when they have been there all along."

THE CONTROVERSY between the environmentalists and the state has been heating up since the Protectors, a local environmental group, discovered workers clearing trees and shrubs from the four-acre site in Corson's Brook Woods on the state-owned land.

They took the matter to court and asked Supreme Court Justice Rose McBrien for a permanent injunction to force the relocation of the group homes.

McBrien reserved decision until later this month. Connelly said the state had made

no secret about what areas were "being phased out and what areas were being used for group home purposes."

She said she was amazed that the state had not sought even more land "to serve the retarded population than what they are utilizing."

CONNELLY noted she has always been "a clear, staunch supporter of the establishment of the Greenbelt and an outspoken advocate of preserving trees."

"But trees and shrubs will grow again," she stated. "My first priority was and is the needs of the handicapped and that they be adequately provided for."

Last Friday, city and state officials met with Arthur Webb, the commissioner of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. They want Webb to seek alternative sites on the property instead of choosing one the Protectors said "would destroy one of the most environmentally significant woodlands" in the heart of the Greenbelt on Staten Island.

Webb told the officials, including Parks Commissioner Henry Stern, that he intends to go ahead with the plan to build the homes. They will consist of two, 12-bed facilities, to be followed by two more buildings.

STERN CALLED it "a very good, very informative meeting," but indi-

cated he was not about to back down from his stand for preserving the woodland.

Yesterday, Dick Buegler, the president of the Protectors, sought Gov. Cuomo's aid, stressing the governor's "ability to work on compromises."

In a letter hand-delivered to Cuomo, the Protectors said, "Due to an inadequate formulated planning, the Office of Mental Retardation has decided to build a group home right in the Corson's Brook Woods area, a 40-acre site."

"Certainly, there are other equally suitable places at the Staten Island Developmental Center on which to build this complex, for we, too, are concerned to meet the needs of the retarded and developmentally disabled."



Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly