

SIDC future use argued at lunch

By JULIE MACK
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The needs of handicapped persons should be the top priority in determining future use of the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) property, advocates for the mentally retarded told city and state officials yesterday.

The possibility that the College of Staten Island (CSI) may acquire most of the surplus property drew attack from a spokeswoman for the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Developmental Disabilities

Council (SIRRDC), who said that after giving property to CSI there would be little room for anything else.

SIRRDC wants all 300 acres of surplus property at SIDC for residential and recreational facilities for the disabled.

"We are being asked to play second banana to the college, and we can't get any response on our ideas until the college makes up its mind what it wants to do," Genevieve Benoit said yesterday at SIRRDC's annual legislative



Assemblyman Robert A. Straniere addresses a luncheon meeting of the Staten Island Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Council. Left to right are Thomas LaManna, an aide to Borough President Ralph Lamberti; Barry Friedland, chairman of the council; Straniere; James Walsh, director of the Staten Island Developmental Center, and Diane Buglioli, council vice chairman.

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Handicapped

(From Page 1)

luncheon in the Staaten, West Brighton. "It's like they go first, we come second. And I think that is extremely unfair."

SIDC, which encompasses more than 50 buildings on a 382-acre campus, is scheduled to close in 1987. The state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) plans to keep 90 acres for the proposed Richmond Complex, to be comprised of existing group homes and the state Institute of Basic Research in Mental Retardation, plus four additional group homes planned for construction. The future use of the remaining 300 acres is now being debated by a state task force created by the state Office of General Services.

Ms. Benoit and other SIRRDC members have been pressuring OMRDD to set aside even more land for the handicapped. A plan SIRRDC submitted to the task force requests 100 acres for more residential facilities, 125 acres for a recreational complex and 60 acres for a camp.

Harry Friedland, SIRRDC chairman, said the land is needed because of the desperate need to expand services for the Island's handicapped.

"The 149 beds planned for the Richmond Complex leaves little room for emergency housing situations," Ms. Benoit said, noting that many of those beds will be taken by people discharged from SIDC. "We'll have more situations like the recent past where people have had to go out of state for residential services because there are no beds here."

SIDC Director James Walsh defended the decision to retain only 90 acres by saying he doesn't want to create "a mini-institution." He said the Richmond Complex should be sufficient to meet local needs if

more group homes are built in the community.

"I think the extra beds should be in the community and I think we should fight for more beds there," he said.

But several parents disagreed. "There is a group of parents out there who do think their children need a more restrictive environment (than a community residence) and I think parents should make the decision on whether their child stays in the community," said Sonya Braniff, an SIRRDC member.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly agreed that the state should "land bank" part of SIDC for future group home construction. "History will prove which one of us is right," she told Walsh.

Discussion also focused on the College of Staten Island, which has expressed interest in acquiring a bulk of the surplus SIDC property to consolidate the college's present campuses in Sunnyside and St. George.

Walsh said he thought the CSI proposal was the main factor delaying the task force, which was to have a final report this month for Gov. Marjo M. Cuomo. The group has not met since July, when CSI announced its interest in the campus, and not even a draft report has been written.

"Frankly, I think (the Office of General Services) is waiting for the college to make their decision" on what, if any, areas of the SIDC property the college would like to acquire, Walsh said.

"I expect a decision within two weeks," Walsh added. "(CSI President Edmond) Volpe was out touring the facility on Tuesday, going through our buildings and such."

Members of the task force at yesterday's luncheon, including Ms. Benoit, Mrs. Connelly and

Assemblyman Robert A. Stranieri, said they were distressed by the delay and hope to reconvene the group within 30 days.

Also discussed yesterday was the current controversy surrounding the Richmond Complex. Local environmentalists and city officials have protested that Corson's Brook Woods, the site for the proposed group homes, is a valuable woodland, which should be preserved.

SIRRDC repeated its support for the state's site selection, but did not have a chance to question officials on their stance. Mrs. Connelly has already said she backs the state plan, but Stranieri and city Councilman Jerome X. O'Donovan left before the discussion period. Assemblyman Eric N. Vitiliano sent a representative to the luncheon, as did Borough President Ralph Lamberti.

Stranieri did tell the group that "we have 82 acres which are undeveloped and which must be preserved" at SIDC, and said he hoped the task force could be reconvened to "counsel and give direction" on the matter. He added that he thinks there is still time to accommodate all interests.

It was unclear whether Stranieri was referring to Corson's Brook Woods in his remarks. SIRRDC members later wondered out loud if Stranieri was subtly voicing his support for the environmentalists. "It was very sneaky of him, slipping out like that without answering any questions," one parent said.

Thomas LaManna, Lamberti's representative, said Lamberti agreed "the property should be continued for use for disabled persons."

"Clearly the borough president puts people first — before trees, before buildings," LaManna said. "But that's not to say he is against the environment."