

Corson's Woods center of controversy

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The controversy surrounding Corson's Brook Woods is more than just a question of knocking down 90 trees to construct four group homes.

At heart is a direct conflict between two emotion-laden issues that have dominated Staten Island for the past decade — the shutdown of Staten Island Developmental Center and the creation of the Greenbelt.

The needs of each side are great and painfully real. There is need to preserve the Island's

shrinking natural reserves, made difficult by pressure from developers. There is tremendous need for group homes for the mentally retarded, made difficult by community resistance.

Perhaps most significant is the question of allocating uses for the limited undeveloped land remaining on Staten Island.

At the center of debate is Corson's Woods, a 40-acre tract located along Forest Hill Road in Willowbrook. Although part of SIDC, the woods have never been developed. Environmentalists considered it one of the Sta-

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ten Island's most important woodlands, a point never disputed.

The roots of the current controversy can be traced to a City Planning Department report issued in February 1983 — the long-awaited Greenbelt study. It advocated city protection of 2,000 acres of parks, undeveloped woods and "lightly developed" property from further development. Among the land

tagged for protection was Corson's Woods.

The Greenbelt report was a result of two decades of intense lobbying by ever-increasing ranks of Islanders who feared rapid development would devour Staten Island's natural resources. Establishment of the Greenbelt was necessary, supporters said, to protect the Island's most precious resources — its natural beauty, its open spaces.

There was glee among supporters earlier this year when the city officially established the

Greenbelt. But problems remain: Only some of the 2,000 acres are presently under city jurisdiction. The remainder — including Corson's Woods — is either controlled by the state or federal government or privately owned, and not all of the controlling interests have the same priorities as the people who created the Greenbelt proposal.

Indeed, the situation now surrounding Corson's Woods confirms the Greenbelt supporters' worst fears. While they were