

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

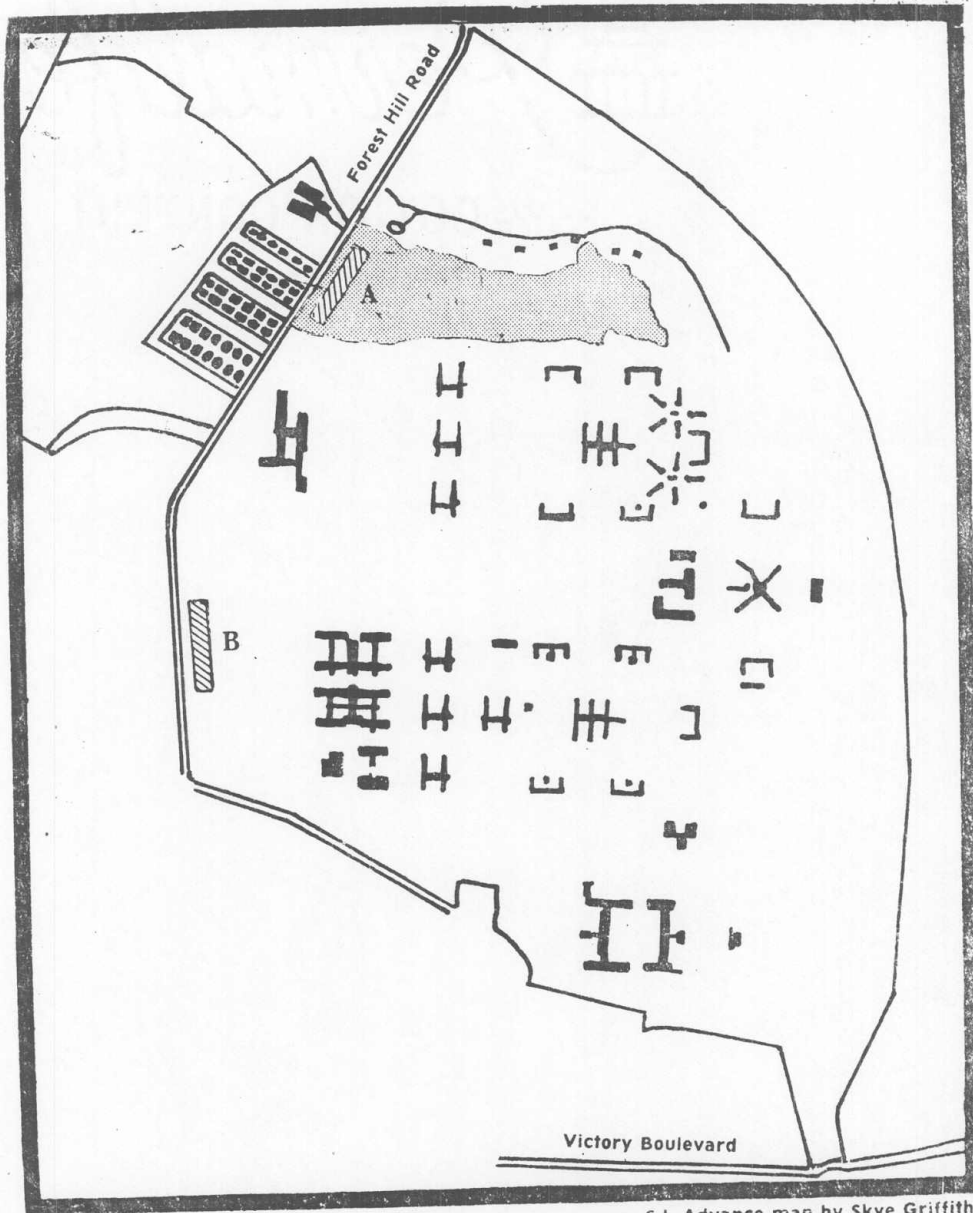
tagged for protection was Corson's Woods.

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



S.I. Advance map by Skye Griffith

A map of the Staten Island Developmental Center. The shaded area is Corson's Brook Woods; tracts A and B represent the two proposed sites for group homes.

eyeing the woodlands for the Greenbelt, the people who controlled the land — including SIDC director James Walsh — had other ideas.

Ironically, Walsh's situation parallels that of the Greenbelt advocates. Like them, Walsh and his supporters view Corson's Woods as a key in the final implementation of a long-held dream. In this case, the dream is closing SIDC and expanding community-based services for the mentally retarded.

SIDC is scheduled to close in 1987; in the next two years, the vast majority of its 1,000 mentally retarded patients will return to their native boroughs. Only native Islanders will remain, and Walsh plans to house them in the so-called Richmond Complex, two 12-bed group homes and two 24-bed facilities he wants located in Corson's Brook Woods.

Walsh had his reasons for picking Corson's Woods. It is the only undeveloped parcel at SIDC that the state judged suitable for development and that adjoined a residential community. The latter point was particularly important since Walsh wants his clients in a community setting.

When environmentalists and the city Planning and Parks departments heard about Walsh's proposal, sparks were inevitable. Both sides were emotionally committed to their position; both were convinced of the righteousness of their stance.

For their part, Walsh and his supporters — including Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, D-West Brighton, and Island advocates for the retarded — say they are tired of getting shoved around on the group home issue. Ever since it began 10 years ago, placing the retarded in communities has met with public resistance.

In fact, Walsh said the difficulty in obtaining approval for group homes was a reason he wanted to build on SIDC property. Since Corson's Woods is state land, no local approval is needed to build there.

Many advocates of the retarded are incensed that they are meeting resistance once again — this time on their own turf. And while city officials and environmentalists talk about trees, the advocates say they suspect the unspoken issue is

prejudice against the group homes and the retarded.

"The reality is that once again we are being denied a place for one of our group homes," said Genevieve Benoit, of the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council. "You can't take property which the developmentally disabled have utilized for the past 20 years and say we can't use this land either."

"I think the Protectors (of Pine Oak Woods, a local environmental group) are sincerely trying to protect the trees, but I don't think they would get the kind of community support they are getting if we were planning to build a Little League field instead of group homes," Walsh said.

To back their accusations, advocates of the retarded point to a field located several hundred yards from Corson's Woods where trees were bulldozed to create a Little League field. The bulldozing occurred at the same time the Protectors were going to court to save Corson's Woods. "We didn't hear any complaints about that (the Little League field)," Walsh said acidly. "But then, it's for normal kids, not for the retarded."

Moreover, some people admit they are uncomfortable that the land was being used for group homes. Judy Berger, a Protectors member who lives across the street from Corson's Woods, told a reporter that she feels there are already enough group homes in her neighborhood. City Parks Commissioner Henry Stern said he supports group homes, but questions whether profoundly retarded, multi-handicapped persons can best utilize the woodlands.

Certainly, the rights-of-the-handicapped issue has had a strong influence on Walsh's supporters. One city official suggested that after a decade of fighting community resistance to group homes, advocates for the retarded have adopted a "garrison" mentality — that they have become steeled to all opposition, no matter how justified the opposition might be.

Indeed, city officials and environmentalists insist their request is not unreasonable. They say they are not blocking the construction of group homes; that, in fact, they support the group home concept. "We just have a problem with the loca-

tion," said George Pratt, member of the Protectors.

"The naturalists who have studied it say that in terms of variety, of richness in natural flora, the Island has really two exceptional areas and one is Corson's Woods," Pratt said. "If we lose Corson's Woods, we lose 50 percent of what we have."

City officials, including Island Planning Director Marilyn Mammano, have suggested that SIDC relocate the group home project to another site along Forest Hill Road. Walsh says no other sites are suitable for development; Ms. Mammano says other areas were given only a cursory look and has suggested more comprehensive studies.

Walsh rejected that idea. Even if another site was available, he said, he thought his clients deserved the best — in this case, Corson's Woods.

Not surprisingly, Stern and other city officials view the state's stance as unduly obstinate. One city official commented that "he (Walsh) keeps talking about it as if it were his land. Well, it's state land, and all the state is doing is holding it in trust for the public."

For now, the state has held firm on its commitment to build the homes. But construction has been halted by a temporary court order, and SIDC and the Protectors are still awaiting a ruling on the Protector's request for a permanent injunction.