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Our opinion/

Room for 2 at SIDC

Few issues have polarized Staten Islanders as much as the present dispute over what to do with the Staten Island Developmental Center property once it is vacated.

On one side are those who say it should become a consolidated campus for the College of Staten Island. Such a consolidation, it is argued, would remedy the college's schizophrenia over the current two-campus setup, and would cost less than building a new campus from scratch in South Beach.

On the other side are those who say the land should be used solely for the handicapped. The Willowbrook site, it is argued, has a long history of service as a hospital and as a center for treating the mentally retarded, and should be kept in the service of the handicapped, who have precious few services elsewhere.

Now the state mental retardation commissioner, Arthur Webb, says there is ample room for both.

At a meeting with the Advance Editorial Board last week, Commissioner Webb added his voice to those who advocate moving the college to the Willowbrook site. What's more, he says there is no reason the college could not co-exist with, and even assist in, services for the handicapped.

The commissioner is right. The developmental center campus consists of 382 acres. The state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities will keep only 90 of those acres for future use. That leaves nearly 300 acres to spare — more than enough room for both the college and the handicapped.

As Commissioner Webb sees it, the vacated Willowbrook property offers "an absolutely wonderful opportunity" for the two groups to forge a cooperative relationship.

That seems reasonable. The college's education and science departments would certainly

benefit from the proximity of state facilities for the handicapped and the Institute for Basic Research in Mental Retardation. The state, in turn, would benefit by the addition of academic interest from the college.

It is a much more realistic scenario than the one advanced by supporters of the South Beach site, who claim the college might eventually develop a medical program in conjunction with nearby Staten Island Hospital. That *could* happen, at some distant point in the future, if the money were to become available, but it is highly speculative. Meanwhile, the opportunity at the developmental center is possible now, not in some future decade.

Financial considerations alone present a forceful argument for the Willowbrook site over the South Beach site. In 1982, the cost of the South Beach option was estimated at \$200 million, but that was based on a 1984 starting date. Obviously that has not happened, and the real cost is now far greater.

Renovating the buildings at the developmental center would surely be expensive, but not nearly as expensive as building an entire infrastructure, including utilities, roads, sewers and buildings, from scratch.

Cost aside, the developmental center offers a good, practical opportunity for cooperation between two sometimes competing interests.

The need for higher education is great; but then, so is the need for servicing the handicapped. Why place the two in a head-to-head confrontation that is unnecessary?

If, as Commissioner Webb contends, there is room enough for both at the developmental center, then there is no point in arguing which need is the greater. They are both important, and can both be accommodated. There is room enough for both at the Willowbrook campus.