

Council fears state will jump gun on SIDC

By JULIE MACK
Advance Staff Writer

Staten Island advocates for the mentally retarded say they fear the state is renegeing on its pledge to involve the community in the disposition of the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) property.

"We've heard no word whatsoever" on the disposition process, Harry Friedland, chairman of the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Council, told the Advance Editorial Board in a meeting earlier this week. "All we want to know is what is going on."

The concern centers on the discontinuance of monthly meetings of a task force which has not convened since July. The task force was created in April by Gov. Mario M. Cuomo to obtain recommendations from Island representatives on the future of the Willowbrook property.

The institution is scheduled to close in 1987, and the state plans to redevelop almost 300 acres of the 382-acre campus.

The task force was originally scheduled to have a draft proposal written by September and a final report finished this month. But the task force still has not even reviewed the proposals for the property, which were collected this summer by the state Office of General Services (OGS).

Arthur Webb, commissioner of the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), who chairs the task force with OGS Commissioner John Egan, told the Advance last week that OGS is still awaiting a proposal from the College of Staten Island before presenting the plans to the task force.

CSI has expressed interest in consolidating its campus on the

Willowbrook property, a concept Webb said he supports.

But Webb's recent endorsement of the CSI proposal angered Friedland, whose group has submitted its own 10-page plan for the property. "What Webb said came as a complete surprise to us," Friedland said. "I think it's a conflict of interest, or at least inappropriate for him to make that sort of comment at this time."

The council members hinted that the state is deciding what it wants to do with the property.

"I can't accept the fact that the state is still working on the proposals without getting input from the task force," Friedland said. "We feel we have the right to say something about what happens. When people start making comments that might be committing the state to a certain purpose for that land ... well, we have the right to have some dialogue."

"We don't object to the college" moving to Willowbrook, said Diane Buglioli, vice chairwoman of the retardation council. "But we want the state to show us why we don't need the 300 acres for the handicapped."

The council's plan recommends a 200-bed complex to serve as transitional housing for handicapped people awaiting placement in community residences; a 60-acre camp, and a 125-acre recreational complex to include ball fields, a gymnasium, a swimming pool, tennis courts, running tracks, a theater and a meeting hall for public use, with priority given to the handicapped.

The residential complex is especially needed because of the shortage of housing for the handicapped, the council members said.

that Webb's statement suggests state officials are moving ahead on plans for SIDC without consulting the task force.

"I think the state wants everyone to believe the delay (in reconvening the task force) was because of the election," said Genevieve Benoit, a member of the council and one of 11 Islanders on the task force. "But I think what's really happening is

"There is nothing available in our community," Friedland said. "People are going outside the borough to place their children."

Although it has not adopted the council's plan, Webb's agency plans to build a 72-bed residential complex at Corson's Brook Woods, a 40-acre woodland tract on the SIDC property. But construction of the homes has been halted by a temporary court order obtained by environmentalists who say the site should remain a natural preserve. The case is still pending in Supreme Court.

Council members, who support the state's group home proposal, said that the Corson's Woods controversy has been exacerbated by the delay in reconvening the task force. In the absence of a forum where community representatives can negotiate their interests, council members said, there has evolved a pitched battle that has stalemated immediate plans to build group-homes, which are desperately needed.

"We find ourselves being pushed into January and nothing has happened," Ms. Buglioli said. "We have 100 Islanders who need housing right now. But nothing is happening."

"It's a Mexican standoff," said Friedland. "We don't enjoy it. We don't want it. We want to close the gap created by inactivity by the task force."

"We are not opposing anyone, but we have the right to have dialogue."

"The clock is moving along, but we're standing still," Ms. Buglioli said.

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(The Advance Editorial Board for this meeting included Les Trautmann, editor; William Huus, associate editor; Mark Hanley, editorial page editor; Mark Davis, editorial writer; Martha Bendix, copy editor, and Julie Mack, copy editor/reporter.)