

Our opinion/

CSI Willowbrook plan fine, but needs work

A consultant has confirmed what many people have long suspected — that the Staten Island Developmental Center is the best site for a consolidated campus of the College of Staten Island. Good. But that's not the end of the issue. There is much, much more to be done.

The choice of Willowbrook over Ocean Breeze is certainly a victory for common sense. In almost every respect, the developmental center was found to be better than Ocean Breeze: It is less expensive — \$196 million versus \$249 million at midpoint in construction. Many of its buildings can be easily adapted for college use. The property is aesthetically suited for a college campus. And the timetable for construction would be shorter — four years to completion, "if all goes well."

At this point, there is every reason to believe the Willowbrook site will be chosen for the new CSI campus. The college wants it, the state budget office wants it, even the state mental health commissioner, who now controls the property, wants it.

It's a good move, but it cannot take place in a vacuum. Now that the college has found its future home, we must take the issue two steps further.

First, it must be made clear that the college cannot have the entire developmental center all to itself. There must be room for facilities for the handicapped and mentally retarded, for environmentalists, and for recreational activities.

The developmental center consists of 390 acres. Ninety of those acres will be retained by the state for group homes and the Institute for Basic Research. That leaves 300 acres to be split among everyone else. There is ample room for accommodation.

The college says it wants 187 acres, which would leave 113 acres for the others. Whether it will get that much remains to be seen. To be fair, the college will have to make the same accommodations as everyone else. No one can have a monopoly on the developmental center property.

But even if we accept the fact that the college will relocate to Willowbrook, it does not answer the important question of who gets what. Specifically, which buildings, woodlands and ballfields will be removed, which will stay, and who gets to keep what?

The proper forum for deciding the issue is the state task force created last year for just that purpose. The group has not met since last July, but now that the college's consultant report is completed, the group must convene again. If the state is slow in calling another meeting, local members of the group should make every effort to call one themselves. The job at hand is too important to allow the task force to die quietly.

While that decision is being made, a second important question must be answered: What will become of the properties the college leaves behind?

In the excitement of building a new campus, and the confusion of making plans for what will be the new campus, it is easy to forget that three other properties hinge on the college's plans — the Sunnyside campus, the St. George campus and the unused Ocean Breeze property.

These properties cannot be left to rot through bureaucratic indifference. One need only look at the old Staten Island Hospital building in Tompkinsville to see what comes of that. The same sort of thing cannot be allowed to happen in Sunnyside and St. George.

Before a single classroom or office is moved from the present college sites, it must be decided what will happen to the cast-away properties.

Disposing of the buildings in St. George may not be as easy as it seems. There is already an excess of office space in St. George, and more is on the way. To what useful purpose could the old buildings be put?

Then there is the 110-acre Ocean Breeze property. The college's consultant recommends selling it for \$20 million to a developer who could turn it into 1,492 condominiums. That's exactly the kind of fast-buck development that has ruined so much of Staten Island already. Is it really the best use of such a large, government-owned parcel?

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the 42-acre Sunnyside campus. Again, the consultant recommends letting it be turned into 645 condominiums and pocketing the cash. That would be far from compatible with the neighboring, low-density community.

It may well turn out that residential development is the most viable alternative in Sunnyside, but other options must be explored in more detail, with sufficient public discussion.

Several years ago it was suggested that an Island judicial center might be moved there. That's a possibility. Perhaps the campus could house additional facilities for the handicapped. That might be an appropriate part of a college-for-developmental center tradeoff. What about state offices? If the Port Authority finally sells the World Trade Center, as some have suggested, that would not be an unwelcome development.

Clearly many troubling questions remain.

It is not enough to simply move the college to Willowbrook and declare it a success. Any move to consolidate must include a comprehensive plan for the Willowbrook property, the Sunnyside property, the Ocean Breeze property and the St. George properties.

A thriving new college at Willowbrook will be good news ... but not if it comes at the expense of other Staten Island communities left with the abandoned scraps.