

Connelly: CSI first on Willowbrook

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In theory, nothing definite has been decided about the future use of the Staten Island Developmental Center property (SIDC). But at least some of those involved with the issue view the relocation of College of Staten Island (CSI) to Willowbrook as a near certainty.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, whose district includes Willowbrook, says she feels "only something really dramatic" will stop the state Office of General Services from transferring the bulk of the Willowbrook property to CSI.

"The state Division of Budget has determined that that's the site they want for the college," she said. "And the Division of Budget really runs this state."

Mrs. Connelly said that means others with an interest in the Willowbrook property must negotiate from the standpoint that the college has first priority.

"It seems better to negotiate than to go to war over the college plan," Mrs. Connelly said. Any attempt to kill the college plan entirely would probably be a losing battle, she said.

If there is a fight, the battleground will probably be the state task force, which was formed last year to make recommendations on the disposition of the Willowbrook property. The task force, which is comprised of four state officials and nine Islanders (including Mrs.

Connelly), meets again Thursday at SIDC.

The group has not met since July; monthly meetings were suspended by state General Services Commissioner John Egan, the task force chairman, who wanted to wait until the college submitted a formal proposal. That delay has been viewed by many as one sign that the state will give the college plan first consideration.

At stake are 300 acres, more than 50 brick buildings and some of the best woodlands left on Staten Island; for the past 40 years the site has housed SIDC, a state institution for the mentally retarded which is scheduled to close by the end of 1987.

Besides the college, others with an interest in the property include: the city Parks and Planning departments, who want the woodlands and open areas for community recreational use; Mrs. Connelly and Island advocates for the handicapped, who want recreation and residential facilities for the handicapped; the regional Little League association, which has talked about establishing its headquarters at Willowbrook; and community groups, including Young Israel of Staten Island, who would like to develop community services at the site.

The college proposal, which was released earlier this month, requests 187 acres carved through the center of the SIDC grounds. The college wants the land to build a new campus consolidating the present campuses at Sunnyside and St. George.

While the plan leaves about 113 acres for other uses, there are potential conflicts. One possible problem involves the grassy open areas bordering the main drive into the property.

Those fields are now used extensively by the community for athletic competitions, and city officials want it to stay that way. In addition, the city wants all the woodlands on the site incorporated in the Greenbelt. The college proposal includes some of the ballfield areas and some of the woodlands.

Thomas Paulo, administrator of Staten Island Greenbelt, said he is confident "something can be worked out." However, he said the city is committed to trying to keep the ballfields and woodlands available for public use.

He said that there is a desperate need for ballfields on the Island and those at Willowbrook constitute an important community resource. "We really need to keep those because there's nowhere else we can move," he said.

An even bigger conflict is looming between the college and Island advocates for the handicapped, led by Mrs. Connelly, who say the handicapped should have first stake to the property.

"That land has been used by the handicapped for the past 40 years," she said. "They should get something out of it now."

The Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council (SIRRDC), a consortium of private and public agencies and consumers, has submitted to the state task force a proposal that includes 60 acres for a camp, 125 acres for a recreational complex and a 200-bed residential facility — all geared especially for the handicapped.

Mrs. Connelly also wants the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities to set aside land for building group homes in the future. "We really need to protect ourselves on this handicap issue," Mrs. Connelly said. "They (the handicapped) are still not being accepted into the community."