

# SIDC future a hot topic for state officials

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After years of regarding the future of Staten Island Developmental Center as a big question mark, the fate of the Willowbrook facility should finally be resolved by the end of 1985.

Encompassing almost 390 acres, more than 50 buildings, plus some of the best woodlands left on Staten Island, the Willowbrook campus is now in a state of transition.

Gov. Mario Cuomo announced last year his intention to close SIDC, which has been an institution for the mentally retarded for more than 30 years. Under the state's plan, the 900 clients presently residing at Willowbrook will be placed in residential facilities around the state, leaving only native Islanders — who will be housed in the proposed Richmond Complex, two 12-bed and two 24-bed homes to be built on an undeveloped tract of the SIDC grounds.

The Richmond Complex, along with the state Institute for Basic Research in Mental Retardation and group homes on the southeast corner of the campus, will form a 90-acre area of the SIDC property to be retained by the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. The remaining 300 acres — including the imposing brick dormitories which once housed more than 6,000 patients — will be redeveloped for other uses.

Those new uses are still a matter of question. A state task force on the issue has not met since July, but a major contender for the property is the College of Staten Island, which is looking for a site on which to consolidate its St. George and Sunnyside campuses.

CSI released a report earlier this month in which the SIDC campus was named as the best site for the consolidated campus, and CSI President Edmund Volpe says he is excited about the possibility of moving to Willowbrook.

The move first must be approved in upcoming months by the City University of New York board of trustees, which meets tomorrow; the task force and the Office of General Services, which controls disposition of surplus state land, and finally, by the state Legislature, which must approve funding.

If all goes according to plan, CSI will commission another study this year to develop a master plan for a new campus at Willowbrook, a proposal that will probably utilize between eight and 12 of the existing buildings.

CSI is requesting 187 acres for its use, so even if that plan is approved, there would be room to accommodate other interests on the Willowbrook property.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly and Island advocates for the mentally retarded want land for community athletic facilities — including an Olympic-sized pool, running track and gymnasium — geared especially for the handicapped.

Mrs. Connelly would also like land set aside in case the state needs more property to build in the future. Community advocates for the retarded would like to see another residential facility built now for the severely handicapped, plus the establishment of a recreational camp.

The city Planning and Parks and Recreation departments would like to maintain the ballfields currently on the Willowbrook property, in addition to preserving the property's woodlands.

The preservation issue has become particularly controversial because one area tagged by the city for inclusion in the Greenbet is Corson's Brook Woods, a

40-acre tract on the southeast corner of the Willowbrook property. But the state Office of Mental Retardation wants to build its proposed Richmond Complex in the woods, which lies between the Institute for Basic Research and the existing group homes.

In fact, the state started clearing the woods for construction in November. A local environmental group, the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, saw trees cut down and obtained a court injunction to halt the work.

Supreme Court Justice Rose McBrien has ordered that construction be suspended until a trial, which has not yet been scheduled. If the Protectors are successful in their court action — they want the court to order

the state to build at another site — than the state must decide whether to appeal, file a countersuit or simply move to another location.

However, SIDC Director James Walsh has steadfastly maintained that Corson's Brook Woods is the only undeveloped site on the SIDC campus that adjoins a residential neighborhood and is thus suitable for community residences for the handicapped.

Resolution of the Corson's Brook Woods conflict is a major issue this year for SIDC, since the institution cannot close down until the Richmond Complex is built — and the controversy has already put construction almost a year behind schedule.

2-2-82