

Willowbrook site OK'd by CUNY board

By JULIE MACK
Advance Staff Writer

With a minimum of ceremony, the City University board of trustees has unanimously approved the relocation of the College of Staten Island (CSI) to the grounds of Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook.

The action at yesterday's board meeting authorized university officials to begin negotiations with the state for 187 acres of the Willowbrook property, which is being vacated by the developmental center.

In addition, the board approved a recommendation, made by the university's office of facilities planning and management, that the new campus include 720,000 net square feet of space.

The building space would give CSI the equivalent of 90 square feet per student, based on a projected enrollment of 8,000 full-time equivalent students by 1990. By comparison, CSI had 57.5 net square feet of building space per student in fall 1983. Overcrowding at the present college facilities in Sunnyside and St. George has been a primary factor in the push for a new campus.

The first of several key approvals CSI must obtain in its quest for a new campus, yesterday's vote proved an easy hurdle. There was little doubt about the outcome: The new campus proposal was endorsed earlier this month by the university's facilities and finance committee, and there was no discussion yesterday as the board approved the recommendations.

"I've heard no one say anything against it," said Donal Farley, City University's vice chancellor of facilities planning and management.

Although creating a consolidation college has been an issue for more than 15 years, the idea of building at Willowbrook has evolved only in the past 12 months.

For years, CSI campaigned for building a new campus at a 110-acre site in Ocean Breeze near Staten Island Hospital, and the university board approved that site several years ago. But before the university acted on its plans, Gov. Mario M. Cuomo announced early in 1984 his intention to close down the developmental center, making that property available.

"Although we had mentioned it from time to time, the Willowbrook site was never seriously considered before (Cuomo's announcement)," Louis Cenci, one of two Islanders on the CUNY

board, said. "We didn't even want to ask about it, because we knew of the (mentally retarded) population that was there, and we didn't want to force them out."

But when the developmental center outlined its plan to vacate almost 300 acres of the property, the board was quick to jump on the possibilities, Cenci said.

"From the viewpoint of someone who has worked in education, I am impressed by the physical layout (of the Willowbrook site), the potential for other facilities, the aesthetics — all the things Willowbrook can add to the educational program at CSI," said Cenci.

"Also, Willowbrook has buildings that can be converted into classroom, laboratory and office space. According to the consultants, we can save \$30 million by converting the buildings at Willowbrook compared to the cost of building a totally new campus. And \$30 million is \$30 million," he said.

Margaret Titone, the other Islander on the board, echoed Cenci's enthusiasm for the Willowbrook site. "The biggest surprise, the biggest plus is that so many of the buildings are intact and usable," she said. "We can have our campus for less money, and we can consolidate years sooner than we would be able to if we had to build a new campus."

She said that when the Ocean Breeze site was approved by the board several years ago, "It was the best site available at the time." But there is no question, she said, that the Willowbrook site is a far superior alternative.

"I know Ed Murphy of Community Board 2 seems to think that the Ocean Breeze location would serve the population better, but I disagree," she said. "Willowbrook is more centrally located for Islanders and it's better located for attracting students from Jersey."

If the Willowbrook proposal is carried out, Cenci said the next step will be determining the fate of the St. George and Sunnyside facilities. CUNY owns, only one

nine-story building in St. George, which consultants say could be sold for an estimated \$9.5 million as office space.

But the Sunnyside campus includes 42 acres and nine buildings, six permanent and three temporary. Consultants hired by the university have suggested that the buildings can be demolished and the property sold to residential developers for \$11 million.

But Cenci said nothing has been decided yet about the fate of the Sunnyside property. "I know the university people are looking into it and they've got a number of ideas," he said. "I'd like something consistent with the neighborhood — nothing commercial; perhaps a legal center or continue using it as a school setting. I'm sure the city will play an important role in the final decision.

"I'll tell you this, we won't move off the property and just walk away," he said.

But before considering disposition of the Sunnyside property, the university must solidify its proposal for Willowbrook. Now

that the board has approved the concept, the architectural consulting firm of Edward Durell Stone Associates, which did the site selection analysis, will de-

velop a master plan for the developing a campus at Willowbrook. The plan, which should be done in April, will act as a guideline to architects, who should begin work this summer.

Also in the next few months — perhaps even in the next few weeks — university officials hope to get a commitment from state officials on acquiring the Willowbrook property. The request for acreage needs the approval of the Office of General Services (OGS), which handles surplus state property.

OGS officials, as well as state budget officials, have already informally indicated they look favorably on the campus proposal.

But CSI President Edmond L. Volpe notes that acquiring the property is not a certainty yet. "I hope the state tells us something soon," Volpe said. "I could sleep easier nights."

He said he is hoping for a decision soon after a public hearing on Feb. 7. The hearing, scheduled for 7:30 p.m. in the auditorium of Sea View Hospital, is being sponsored by OGS and Community Board 2 for discussion on the disposition of the Staten Island Developmental Center property and the college site selection.