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Our opinion/

SIDC: Room to move

Public hearings have been scheduled for Feb. 7 and Feb. 14 to discuss what should be done with the Staten Island Developmental Center property. That's a positive step. Public sentiment always has a place in community planning.

But an equally important concern is what should be done with the College of Staten Island's Sunnyside campus.

So far, no one has addressed that question. Instead, most of the attention has gone to the developmental center and its suitability as a college campus. That's understandable. Until recently, the very question of whether the college would move to Willowbrook was in doubt. But with the approval of the City University board of trustees Monday, and the blessings of the state budget office, the move seems all but certain.

That leaves two related questions: Besides the college, what *else* belongs at the developmental center campus? And what is to be done with the college's Sunnyside campus once the college moves out?

Most observers probably think the two questions are unrelated. After all, what could the disposition of one property have to do with the disposition of the other properties?

Everything, if you look at it in totality.

So far, a long list of charitable organizations have asked for space at the developmental center, in addition to the college. Advocates for the handicapped say they should have first dibs. Environmentalists have laid claim to the woodlands. Sportsmen want to preserve the ballfields. An animal welfare group wants to open a shelter. A theater group wants to open a theater. A synagogue wants to open a senior citizen housing center. And so on, and so on.

All these claims are legitimate, and we expect many will be able to share the developmental center property. But the space is not limitless. It is inevitable that some will be pushed out.

That is where the Sunnyside campus comes in.

Obviously something must be done with the property. It cannot be simply abandoned, as so many surplus properties have been on Staten Island. Such abandoned properties — including the Sea View Farm Colony, the old Staten Island Hospital, and portions of the developmental center itself — have become attractive targets for vandals.

So here we have two problems: There is not enough room for all competing groups at Willowbrook. But there is *too much* room at Sunnyside.

Do you see the connection?

Surely many of the groups seeking space at Willowbrook could be accommodated just as easily at Sunnyside. The Sunnyside campus offers nearly everything the Willowbrook campus offers. There is plenty of open land. There will be plenty of empty buildings when the college leaves. The infrastructure — that is, the sewers, utilities, roads, etc. — is already in place.

Isn't that exactly what many of the groups seeking space at Willowbrook are looking for? Does it really matter if those things are in Sunnyside or in Willowbrook?

The Willowbrook campus can accommodate many worthy groups that would otherwise go begging for space. Or it can be bulldozed and turned into another boring condominium development.

The choice is ours.