

Opinion/

For SIDC land, a modest proposal

By BEATRICE VICTOR

This proposal is made because of multiple needs existing on Staten Island, because the timing is right and because we feel that the basic energies which are buried in antagonism can be harnessed to create an unusual community which will fill these needs.

We believe the following concept can be utilized in the area left after the tract of land allotted to the College of Staten Island has been set aside:

The population served would be: 1. The developmentally disabled; 2. senior citizens with modest means; 3. Young families with and without children and/or single individuals; 4. Environmentalists.

We have a tract of land that is large enough to become a small community — no different than the communities which are being built all over the Island. The state mandate that the developmentally disabled must be housed in a normalized community could easily be accomplished in such an environment. However, there are other seg-

ments of our population, as described above, which have needs. We visualize building an interdependence involving all of these groups, improving their sense of dignity, community spirit, social consciousness and physical and moral well-being.

Private business could still benefit and there would be added tax revenue through the building and existence of this community.

● The developmentally disabled. By creating a total community the DD would naturally be part of the start of the effort. Others in the community would be aware when they purchased or rented their homes that this concept existed. The positives for the client and the state are numerous:

Normal hostility and resistance would be non-existent, therefore time and money expended on combating the above could be saved.

The atmosphere would lend itself to the development of positive programs involving the rest of the community;

The non-profit organizations could start group homes, etc., within guidelines as to how many the number of clients should be (this might require a modification of some existing regulations);

The state could truly restrict itself to the regulatory status it has referred to in the past. At the same time it could develop, if absolutely necessary, any program it must;

Respite care should be more easily developed in this environment (a continuing desperate need which has yet to be addressed in this area) because it could be worked into an agreement at the time of purchase or rental for either a barter or a financial benefit.

● The Senior Citizens are a group who more and more require financial and medical aid which is paid for with our tax dollars. Very often they can no longer be cared for by loving families (and not so loving families); they are not too ill to live at home but they are not capable of taking care of their own needs.

Often they forget to take medications, or they are too tired to prepare proper foods, or forgetful of proper clothing. They are subject to the whims of their bodies which put them in our hospitals time after time because there is no one to drop in and make sure they have taken the one pill or had the insulin and proper diet that day, and also because they are too proud to give up their own independence and move in with their children.

The approximate cost in a hospital is \$350 a day plus any tests that might be taken. Our tax dollars pay for this. But hospital admissions such as these are often unnecessary. A daily visit by a caring community member has made the senior his or her responsibility could be unbelievably helpful.

The foster grandparent program has proven itself in terms of relationship to the DD. What could be better for both groups in terms of dignity and help than to have them living near by within walking or wheelchair distance?

Suppose the now-functioning senior were able to help young parents out with their children as another part of his or her contribution to this community. It would allow the parents to work and yet feel secure that their children were cared for. The concept of the extended community really works.

Beyond that, experience has shown that the DD and senior citizens more often than not require similar care medically, socially, in occupational programs and in physiotherapy. Working with established health facilities could not these services be developed for both?

The Institute for Basic Research is really under-utilized. What would be wrong if some of the staff lived in the community that worked in this facility? Coverage could be better for sick days and snow days. Parents would be more productive on the job. This component could be made available for any surrounding areas within a geographical area designated by the planners.

• Families and single persons with or without children could afford to rent or purchase dwellings if a financial arrangement or a trade-off in terms of service

(group home coverage, nursery, respite care, transportation for the DD, seniors or children) could be arranged.

The other advantages have already been addressed. But think how these families would learn to live with all the other groups described. This could serve as a model for other communities.

• Environmentalists. The community could be built so that Corson's Brook Woods would be part of the whole and could be preserved.

Any members of the community could serve as caretakers of the area under the direction of the environmentalists. Designated Community residents would be responsible for such chores as cleaning up the area, and pruning vegetation, as well as serving as guides and guards for the preserved sections.

Hopefully, the environmentalists could be enlisted to develop beautification programs for community and the college. Would it be improbable to visualize a plant or vegetable business growing within the community?

We have virgin territory and we have many needs. Instead of fighting one another, why not be courageous and build an ideal environment?

Of course there will be objections which should be considered and, if possible, overcome.

Of course there are large questions, such as: How much will it all cost and where will the funds come from (Private investors, government funds or a combination of government money with matched private funds)? How do we establish the level of need for various facilities? Do we really have enough land to work with? What about authority and maintenance for buildings, grounds, roads, sanitation?

Anything worth doing is worth fighting for. We think this is worth considering, modifying, improving, and expanding. But above all, it is worth doing.

(Beatrice Victor, an Advance Woman of Achievement in 1980, is a past chairwoman of the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council, and of the Staten Island Borough Development Services Office.)

Woods and wants the land included in the Greenbelt.

The controversy over the woods ignited a year ago this month, when the Protectors discovered the state's plan to build the group homes — two 12-bed and two 24-bed facilities — on a nine-acre portion of the 40-acre tract along Forest Hill Road.

The environmentalists immediately pulled out copies of a report by the City Planning Department which termed Corson's Brook Woods one of the most environmentally significant tracts on Staten Island and recommended the site for inclusion in the Greenbelt. State officials noted that the woods are on the grounds of the developmental center and argued that OMRDD is within its rights to use the land as it pleases.

Moreover, OMRDD has said the group homes are desperately needed to house severely retarded people leaving the developmental center, which is scheduled to close in 1987. Because of the opposition it faces in building group homes in the community, OMRDD officials say they must build on state land — and they say Corson's Brook Woods is the only parcel on the SIDC campus which meets the state's criteria.

When the state started building the homes, the Protectors took the OMRDD to court and obtained an order to halt construction. At the state's request, the case was sent to an appeals court for an expedited decision, which a state spokesman said should be delivered within the next few weeks.

Meanwhile, the interested parties continue to talk — although it is questionable what the talks will accomplish.

Last week's meeting between the state attorney general's office, which is representing OMRDD, and the Protectors was initiated by the state, according to Terence Benbow, the Protector's attorney.

"The state invited me to sit down so they could outline what they were doing about the situation," Benbow said, who added that he viewed the invitation as a hint that the state is weakening its stance. "I'm glad they are doing something which shows consciousness of the lack of their legal position."

"Things came out in the meeting that indicate the state is

starting to show some flexibility," Benbow said. "I think they are now to the point where they are ready to consider alternate sites."

But while state officials acknowledge they would like to settle the case, they say they are not budging on their commitment to building the group homes in Corson's Woods.

"The one thing we are not talking about is moving the homes," Ganim said. "Our position is that there is nothing wrong with building the homes in Corson's Woods — that it's a fine, appropriate place."

While Ganim refused to discuss the negotiations, he said any settlement would probably involve the state's plan to preserve the remaining trees on the site after the homes are built. He would not comment on the likelihood of the Protectors accepting such a settlement.

In addition to their negotiations with the state, the Protectors are planning to meet with the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council. The council is not formally involved with the court case, but it has been the OMRDD's strongest proponent in the controversy.

Not only has the council launched a letter-writing campaign in support of the group homes, but some council members have publicly charged that the real issue is prejudice against the retarded.

Because of the council's lack of authority in the matter, no solutions to the controversy can be directly worked out between the Protectors and the council. But its discussions do indicate that the issue is larger than just the group home proposal — that the "tree versus retarded people" debate has assumed troubling overtones, especially since both leadership groups express cautious respect for each other's positions.

The meeting might help to heal "any animosity which has been created," said Harry Friedland, chairman of the regional council. "We're all from Staten Island and we don't want to get in a situation where we are pitted against each other."

"I think it's time for all of us to get together. The time has come to stop dealing with invisible voices. We need to sit down and break bread."

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