

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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