

Group homes in woods get Willowbrook board backing

By JULIE MACK
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Plans to build four group homes in Corson's Brook Woods are consistent with the city's 1982 Greenbelt study, despite protests by environmentalists to the contrary, according to members of the Willowbrook Board of Visitors:

"This is the Bible they (the environmentalists) are going by," said Michael Lumetta, president of the Board of Visitors, pointing to a copy of the Greenbelt study, "and everything which is being done conforms with that book. There is no hanky-panky going on."

"They are calling it a rape of the land, and the word 'rape' is a misnomer if there ever was one.

The land is not going to be raped," said Herman Fishman, another member of board, which serves to protect the interests of patients at Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC).

The comments came in a meeting between the Board of Visitors and the Advance Editorial Board. The Board of Visitors, which had requested the meeting to discuss the state's decision to build the group homes, staunchly defended the plan.

The state wants to build the homes on a nine-acre parcel to house 72 mentally retarded and multi-handicapped people now living at the SIDC. The institution is scheduled to close in 1987, and the group homes are part of

a plan by the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) to move SIDC patients into community residences.

Arthur Webb, commissioner of OMRDD, says Corson's Brook Woods — located in the southeast corner of the SIDC campus — is ideal for the group homes because the site is located across the street from a residential community. Moreover, the woods are centrally located in a 90-acre tract which OMRDD wants to retain after SIDC closes.

But environmentalists want Corson's Brook Woods untouched. They point to the

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Greenbelt study, which calls Corson's Brook one of the most environmentally significant woodlands on Staten Island. The study recommended the incorporation of the woods into the Greenbelt, a horseshoe-shaped natural area protected by the city from further development.

When OMRDD began site clearance for the group homes in November, the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods — the Island's largest environmental group — took the state to court and obtained a temporary injunction to halt construction. A final decision on the Protectors' petition is expected by the end of March.

Lumetta said the Corson's Brook Woods controversy is technically outside the realm of authority for the Board of Visitors. "But we decided to break the rules" and publicly support the state's position because the issue is so crucial to the Willowbrook residents, he said.

The board members said that plans for the group homes date back to 1983. At that time, they said, the Greenbelt study was examined and the group homes were planned according to guidelines established in the report. "We read it over and over and we followed the recommendations," Lumetta said, noting that the study allows for construction of non-profit facilities.

He said the architects designed the homes to have only minimal environmental effects, and money was budgeted to allow for replanting the trees to be cut down during construction.

As plans were made, Lumetta said, Community Board 2 was informed. Officials at Community Board 2 said that because Corson Brook Woods is already

state-owned land, no public hearing on the issue was necessary.

When the environmentalists discovered the plans for construction, the Board of Visitors asked SIDC Director James Walsh to consider alternate sites on the SIDC property, Sonia Braniff, another board member, said.

Walsh reported back that one of the other two options would mean the elimination of a ball field now used by the New Springville Little League, Mrs. Braniff said. "Even then, the site is so small that we would have row housing instead of cluster housing. And row housing we are totally against."

The other site, located on Forest Hill Road on the north side of the Institute for Basic Research in Mental Retardation, is not practical because of drainage problems, Mrs. Braniff said.

"We have an open mind; we've looked at other sites. But this (Corson's Brook Woods) is really the only buildable site that keeps with the consent decree," she said, referring to the 1975 court document in which the state promised to resettle SIDC clients into community residences.

Fishman said the group homes "could be considered a beautiful memorial" to the changes which have occurred since the days when SIDC was known as the Willowbrook State School, an overcrowded and understaffed institution. "This is our opportunity to do something right," he said.

"It's important to talk about human needs," Fishman added. "People lose sight of the fact that the residents who are supposed to be living in those group

homes have earned more than anybody else the right to enjoy that setting."

Monsignor John Servodidio, pastor of St. Joseph R.C. Church in Rosebank and a Board of Visitors member, acknowledged that it seems extreme to say the environmentalists supporting preservation of the woods are valuing trees more than people — as some board members have charged. "But that is the issue," he said. "Some people may say we are name-calling, but this is a matter of deciding priorities."

"Someone has to make a decision here. And it should be a just decision. The issue is whether we have this in the Greenbelt or whether we provide these people with a home."

"I'm a farm boy and I love trees," Monsignor Servodidio said. "But I can never fathom why trees are more important than human beings. Damn it, there are a lot of green places on Staten Island. But these poor people have been denied a decent home — not only for years, but for centuries."

"To build those homes there would keep us aware of our social responsibility, so that never again will there be another Willowbrook."

The other members of the Willowbrook board, both of whom participated in the meeting, are Harold Kaplan and the Rev. William Epps, pastor of St. Phillip's Baptist Church in Port Richmond.

(The Advance Editorial Board for this meeting was composed of Les Trautmann, editor; William Huus, associate editor; Mark Hanley, editorial page editor; Marc Davis, editorial writer; Martha Bendix, copy editor, and Julte Mack, reporter/copy editor.)