

Connelly helps block state funds

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ALBANY — Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly, with support from Sen. John J. Marchi, appears to have blocked state planning funds for the Staten Island Greenbelt.

Mrs. Connelly said her opposition to the funding stemmed from efforts by conservationists to keep the state from building group homes for the retarded on Willowbrook land known as Corson's Brook Woods.

Borough conservationists say the area should be protected from development.

Marchi, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, said

last night "I backed her (Connelly) up on this issue."

Mrs. Connelly had met with and written to Marchi urging him to refrain from seeking \$1 million requested over three years by the city and the local environmentalists. The money would be used for a Greenbelt "master plan."

Her request came the week budget politicking began in earnest here for the \$39 billion state spending plan lawmakers enacted here early this month.

More than 25 special Island programs and projects were funded, costing the state better than \$2.5 million. But no trace of planning money for the Green-

belt was reported to be included in the budget documents, even after they were widely reviewed in recent weeks.

Marchi, however, insisted Greenbelt money is "still on the agenda."

Funds sometimes are reported "found," after a budget is enacted, in allocations made for one agency or another, and Marchi hinted this could be the case for the Greenbelt.

Connelly, D-West Brighton, indicated she is willing to support the Greenbelt request next year — but only after the dispute over the property is resolved "to the satisfaction of the disabled population."

Protectors of the Pine Oak Woods Inc., has moved in court against the state's development plans, alleging an incursion on the Island's planned protected areas.

A key decision in the case is due soon from a middle-level appellate court panel.

The group, meanwhile, wrote to legislators months ago urging the Greenbelt plan be funded.

Tom Paulo, administrator of the city's Greenbelt office, said when contacted yesterday it was "the first I heard" of the Connelly letter and her position.

As of last night, Paulo said, he still had not heard from elected officials whether at least \$250,000 requested for the first year of the "master plan" development might still be found somewhere in the complex \$39 billion spending plan approved by the Legislature earlier this month.

Paulo said two weeks ago that if the Greenbelt funding were not included it would delay the area's improvement. The funding has been sought for two years.

A while before the crucial budget negotiations began in earnest last month, Paulo said he met with Marchi to discuss the strategy of attaining the funds.

"I would say he was very receptive," Paulo said of Marchi in the meeting, "the point being that we're beyond talking about the Greenbelt. We're talking about making it a viable resource for the community."

Paulo also said Marchi and he discussed specific options for state funding. These included a possible direct allocation for the Greenbelt. Another option was to put a surplus into the state university's funding so that the Syracuse College of Forestry might find money to carry out the planning study.

"They're really separate issues," Marchi said last night of Corson's Brook and the Greenbelt plan. "But a lot of the people who are involved" have made it "one and the same thing," he said in defending his apparent shift on the matter.

"The planning money has some problems," Marchi said. "Although that portion of it (Corson's Brook) is state property, there might be snips of private interest. Primarily it's a city thing."

A Pine Oak Woods spokesman said, however, that Marchi has in the past consistently sup-

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ported state aid for the Greenbelt.

In the budgeting process, there develops what officials here call "member items."

These are grants of state money made basically at the request of individual legislators, giving the legislative member public credit for having attained a certain program or project for his or her district. Often, the member items most requested from the individuals of an area's delegation stand the best chance of inclusion.

Marchi noted the Greenbelt money became a "member item" that was actively opposed by a member of the Island delegation. "That makes it complicated," he said.

Mrs. Connelly, who as chairwoman of the Assembly mental health committee has power to review state services for the retarded, said in a letter to Marchi dated March 22:

"I am unalterably opposed to providing any funds from state coffers to enhance any phase of the Greenbelt program until the issue of the group homes at Corson's Brook is resolved to the satisfaction of the disabled population ..."

"...This land is not in the Greenbelt, even though it is their (Protectors) desire."

"It boggles my mind that in the enlightened age of ensuring that all public services and facilities be handicapped accessible, that we indeed be funding a program of such immense proportions with public dollars which will most certainly not be enjoyed by anyone but the most hearty hiker, much less anyone with a disability."

"Counter to this ideology," she said, "members of the Legislature, recognizing the shortcomings, are sponsoring legislation to provide funds for making certain parks handicapped accessible."

Copies of the letter were reportedly sent to Assemblyman Eric Vitaliano, D-Dongan Hills; chief city lobbyist Claudia Wagner; Henrik Dullea, an advisor to Gov. Mario M. Cuomo; Mental

Retardation Commissioner Arthur Webb, and Assembly Ways and Means Chairman Arthur Kremer, D-Long Beach.

Paulo said after hearing the contents of the letter, "We're dealing with the issue of not only handicapped access but a broad-based constituency."

Some borough conservation money, however, was included in the budget. Forty thousand dollars was earmarked in the final version of the budget for a master plan-management plan for Blue Heron Park, with plans to protect water and drainage systems there.

After budget allocations were put in print April 4, Marchi spokesman Gerald McLaughlin said Marchi "carried" the request for the \$40,000 "on behalf of" Assemblyman Robert A. Straniere, R-Dongan Hills.

For his part, Assemblyman Eric Vitaliano says he supports the Greenbelt funding and wants a quick resolution of the conflict.

Marchi, pressed about the merits of Connelly's argument, said "She's persuaded and I'm almost persuaded she's right... I thought she had the better of that argument."

"You don't want to slap her down on something as basic as this," Marchi added. "I suppose if we had pushed and shoved we probably would have gotten it in. But that's not in the balanced interest of the community, I think. In the long term we have to have consensus on these things."

Reached for comment last night, Ellen O'Flaherty Pratt, an official of the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, reacted to a reading of the Connelly letter by saying, "I find it hard to believe that one of our state legislators would feel that planning funds for the Greenbelt are not warranted at this time."

"The whole situation at Corson's Brook Woods is an unnecessary clash between two community-approved goals," Mrs. Pratt said. "We hope to work with Mrs. Connelly and our other state legislators to see that the needs of the retarded and the needs of people for a Greenbelt are satisfied." "Perhaps some Greenbelt funding can still be fitted in this year's budget process," she said.

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