

Group home work could begin soon

By JULIE MACK
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In the wake of a court decision tossing out the objections of environmentalists, construction should begin soon on two 12-bed group homes in Corson's Brook Woods on the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) in Willowbrook.

A timetable for the project will probably be set later this week or early next week, said Louis Ganim, spokesman for the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, the agency which is building the homes.

"I assume we'll go ahead with our plans as soon as it is practical and feasible," he said. "At this point, I can't tell you more than that. We haven't even seen the court decision yet."

That decision, delivered Monday by the Appellate Division of the state Supreme Court, swept aside an attempt by the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, an Island environmental group, to block construction on the 40-acre woodlands, located along Forest Hill Road in the southeast corner of the SIDC campus.

A 1983 City Planning Department report called Corson's Brook Woods one of the most environmentally significant woodlands on Staten Island and recommended the tract for inclusion in the Greenbelt.

However, the Office of Mental Retardation — which operates SIDC and controls the property — wants to build two 12-bed and two 24-bed homes on a nine-acre portion of Corson's Brook Woods to house multi-handicapped Islanders who are now residents at SIDC. The institution is scheduled to close in 1987, and its clients are being resettled into community residences.

The Office of Mental Retardation said of the SIDC's 380 acres, Corson's Brook Woods was the only site which meets the requirements for the group homes. Other sites are either unsuitable for construction or are not located next to a residential community, according to state officials.

Under the original timetable, construction on the two 12-bed homes was to begin last fall so the homes could be ready for clients by summer. However, when site clearance began in November, the Protectors filed suit and obtained a temporary injunction to stop construction from Supreme Court Judge Rose McBrien.

Monday's decision by the appellate court only reversed Mrs. McBrien's ruling on the temporary injunction; an action is still pending in Supreme Court on the environmentalists' request for a permanent injunction. However, it could be months before a trial is held on the permanent injunction and, meanwhile, the state is free to build on the site.

In Albany yesterday, Gov. Mario M. Cuomo said he plans to visit the disputed area.

The Protectors had asked the governor to visit the site. One visit was scheduled but later canceled, due to time constraints, Cuomo aides said.

"I want to be able to fit that in," Cuomo said yesterday of the visit, "And we will."

"They (Protectors) felt that seeing it was a kind of irreplaceable experience and I'm sure they're right," he added.

Cuomo said he had not heard about the Appellate Division decision in the case.

Henrik Dullea, Cuomo's director of governmental operations, reasserted that the state's first priority in the dispute is serving the retarded. At the same time, he added, "We'll do everything we can to accommodate" the opponents.

Dullea said he met with state environmental and Office of Mental Retardation officials on the matter 10 days ago.

Terence H. Benbow, the lawyer for the Protectors, said he is "sorry" to hear that the state is going ahead with construction. "I would like to see them go ahead with the group homes, but in an area that's not detrimental to Corson's Brook Woods," he said.

He also questioned the propriety of the state proceeding with construction before the Protectors decide whether to appeal this latest ruling to the Court of Appeals, the state's highest, or before a trial is held in Supreme Court on the request for a permanent injunction.

"It would seem premature to go ahead with construction at this stage," Benbow said. "We've only heard from the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal. We've won one and they've won one. We still got two more courts to hear from, the court of Appeals and the Supreme Court again."

Benbow said no decision has been made yet on filing an appeal, but "that would be a possibility if they go ahead with construction." The other, preferable alternative was an out-of-court settlement between the two parties, he said. To date, though, there has been no substantive movement toward such a settlement.

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