

# Corson's group homes: Study details site logic

By JULIE MACK  
Advance Staff Writer

A newly released state-funded report contradicts local environmentalists who claim the proposed construction of four group homes in Corson's Brook Woods will irreparably damage valued woodlands.

Although the project will "alter the natural character" of the woodlands, the potential impact is not enough to justify relocation of the project, according to an environmental impact study by the Manhattan consulting firm McKeown & Franz Inc. The study's conclusion was reported

Saturday in the Advance, although the study itself was not made available to the press until this week.

The report analyzes two other sites in addition to Corson's Woods and concludes that Corson's Woods is the most suitable for the project.

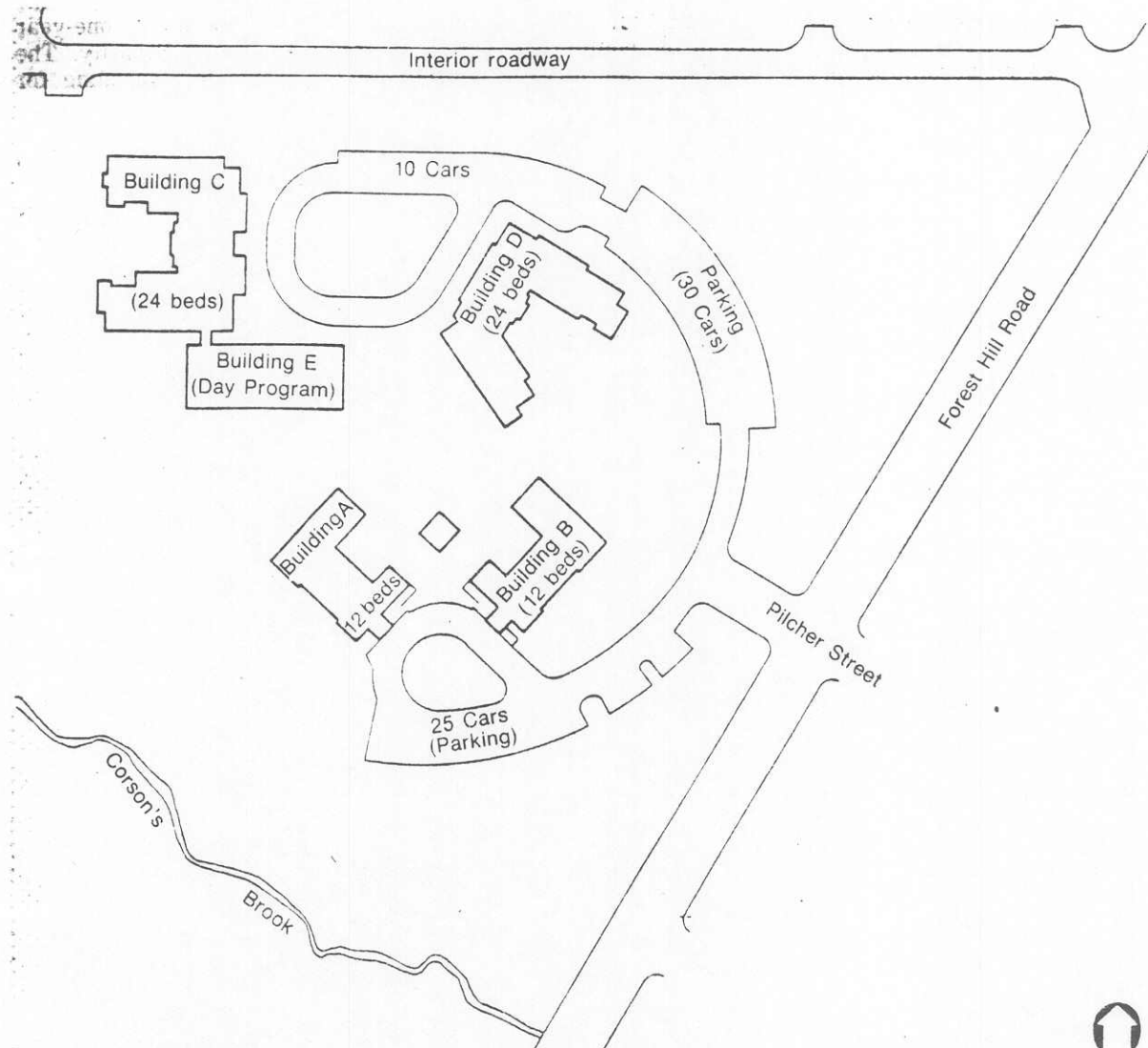
The environmental impact statement was commissioned by the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), which wants to build the four group homes to house 72 multi-handicapped Staten Islanders leaving Staten Island Developmental

Center (SIDC) when the institution shuts down in 1987.

While the study acknowledges the environmental significance of the woodlands, it says damage caused by construction will be minimal. "Project development will result in reduction of the native plant species found in Corson's Brook Woods, including species rare or uncommon to Staten Island," the report says.

"(But) mitigation measures include minimal tree clearing, protection of trees on site which will remain after construction and replanting once construction (See REPORT, Page A 4)

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 McKEOWN & FRANZ, INC.

Map from the state report shows a possible layout for four group homes on the Corson's Brook Woods site.

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is completed. Most of the woods will be left undisturbed so that the ecological values of this area can continue to be researched and appreciated."

The report's summary concludes that "the potential impact of the proposed project itself will not cumulatively result in any significant environmental effects."

Community comment on the study will be solicited at a public hearing scheduled for 7 p.m. July 1 at the state Institute for Basic Research in Mental Retardation, Willowbrook.

OMRDD was not obligated to obtain an environmental impact

study, since Corson's Woods — which is part of the SIDC campus — is already state-owned. But a report was commissioned to soothe local concerns, according to Louis Ganim, spokesman for the agency.

The 25-acre woodland tract, which is located on Forest Hill Road south of the Institute for Basic Research, has been recommended by the City Planning Department for inclusion in the Greenbelt. Environmentalists consider the site one of the most important woodland tracts on the Island.

The McKeown & Franz report acknowledged that the group home project "is not consistent with the Greenbelt study ... However, although city land use policies and zoning requirements do not apply to state land, the site will be developed in an environmentally sensitive manner and at a lower density than that permitted by local zoning regulations."

Three sites on the SIDC campus were analyzed by the consultants: Corson's Woods, a 20-acre site at the intersection of Forest Hill and Willowbrook roads and a five-acre site on Forest Hill Road adjacent to the ball fields.

While all three met the criteria, the latter two sites pose construction problems, according to the report.

The 20-acre site "entails potential site preparation difficulties due to possible underground springs in the site's northern portion and poor soil conditions which may occur throughout the site. Development of the southern portion of this site also be constrained by the presence of a creek and the proposed development of a boiler plant for the Institute of Basic Research."

Because the five-acre site is not large enough, the group homes could not be built in a cluster there — and that means less recreation space for the residents. The site would also not be "oriented directly towards a residential area," the report says.

"In addition, it would be necessary to cross Corson's Brook to install utility lines for electric service and possibly sewer con-

nection to this site. A pump station would also be necessary for the sewer line connection to the municipal system," the report said about the five-acre site.

The study also said construction costs would be higher at the alternate sites. While the group homes would cost \$3.8 million to build at Corson's Brook, it would cost \$600,000 more at the 20-acre site and \$400,000 more at the five-acre site. Moreover, construction would take six to eight months longer at the alternate sites, the report said, adding that the delay could hinder the scheduled closing of SIDC.

In its analysis of the project's environmental impact on Corson's Woods, the report noted that the removal of mature trees and soil compaction is the biggest problem, "particularly as Corson's Brook Woods is one of the only high-quality woodlands remaining on Staten Island and

is also of ecological interest due to its non-acidic, rich soils."

But the report adds that only 180 of the 780 trees on the site larger than six inches will be removed, clearing only 20 percent of the nine-acre area to be developed. Moreover, construction would not affect a concentration of bladdernut in the southwest corner of the woods, and groves of sugar maple and sycamore trees would also be left alone.

"In sum, the project development will disturb a quality woodland, of a type rare to Staten Island. However, the remaining 16 acres of Corson's Brook Woods at SIDC off the project site will stay preserved, providing habitat for birds and other animals found here, supplying opportunities for ecological research and contributing to the aesthetic quality of the area," the report said.

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