

Sports groups worried plan will erase fields

By ED BARBINI
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Thousands of youths and adults could become athletes in search of a playing field if the state adopts the College of Staten Island's master plan for a unified campus on the site of the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) in Willowbrook.

"This is a disaster," said Jim

Savage, former president of the Staten Island Soccer League, which shares the ballfields on the SIDC site, across from Willowbrook Park, with as many as 12,000 athletes of various ages. "A lot of kids might end up hanging around the streets, because there's no place to play ball."

The college's plan to unite its Sunnyside and St. George cam-

pus at one location could limit or destroy athletic leagues in an area with a growing population, the league's fear.

The fields are located near the SIDC's main entrance, alongside Victory Boulevard. It is one of the busiest recreation areas on Staten Island during the spring

(See FIELDS, Page A 13)



Officials discuss plans for the new campus for the College of Staten Island at Willowbrook. From the left are Michael Kinlaw, vice president of Edward Durell Stone Associates, drafters of the master plan; Peter Capone, president of Stone Associates, and Dr. Edmond Volpe, CSI president.

S.I. Advance Photo by Steve Zaffarano

and summer months.

But CSI's proposal means that at least six different leagues may soon have to find new places to play their games, and a great demand on already limited space could mean the end of some activities.

"I have no idea where we'll go," said Marie Chicola, an official with the Middle Island Youth League. "We'll be a league without a home."

More than 450 youths ages 7 to 16 participate in the Middle Island league; Mrs. Chicola said the league checked with other facilities, but there was nothing available, and prospects for the league's future were not good.

"The borough president promised to take care of us, that we'd have a place to play no matter who owned the land," Mrs. Chicola said. "Maybe he's got a big back yard."

The state Legislature has already commissioned architec-

tural studies of the Willowbrook site. If the 220-acre location is approved as CSI's new home, approval from the Legislature is needed to transfer the land to the college.

As part of the City University of New York system, CSI policy allows outside individuals to use its facilities. The indoor and outdoor facilities at the Sunnyside campus, however, are only available for recreational use when not being used by the college, and a CSI official said that is rarely the case.

"The facilities are first and foremost for students of the college," CSI spokeswoman Liz Seder said. "We schedule many activities and classes, and it would be difficult for Little League or any other group to rely on using our grounds. The time that we are not using them is just very limited, and the college's needs come first."

Elimination of the community ballfields is a turnabout from

earlier impressions. Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly said she thought there was a verbal commitment to keep the ballfields for the community.

She added that she told Gov. Mario Cuomo's chief of operations, Henrik Dullea, that more than "any other issue" on the Island, a controversy over the ballfields would "come back to" the Cuomo administration.

"I told him I thought the Office of General Services (which is responsible for transferring the land to the college) was making a major mistake if it (the agency's recommendation) ... folds in the ballfields" to the college proposal, she said.

Officials of the threatened sports groups say the plan is hurting their needs, and the participants will be the ones to suffer.

"We have 4,000 kids who use the fields all week long," Savage said of the soccer league, which involves youths ages 5 to 18.

"Our kids from the North Shore won't have anyplace to play, and the only recourse may be to cut teams and players. It's not an attractive option, but there's not much choice."

Kids aren't the only ones who are faced with possible eviction. Two fields currently owned by the SIDC are leased to the SAMSAN Softball League, which boasts 1,500 adult members and has played at the Willowbrook site since 1949. The Marietta Medium Pitch League, the Middle Island Men's Softball League and the Staten Island Co-Ed League are two other potential casualties of the CSI move.

"We may end up playing in the streets," one SAMSAN official said. "There's no more recreational area, and just try to find park grounds — they're packed, too. CSI has us in a tough spot."

A city Parks Department official said he doubted more permits could be issued for park use. "Where can we put them?" he asked. "Not on each other. I think CSI is making a big mistake. They are entitled to move, but they could be good neighbors and share the land."

James Walsh, the director of the developmental center, said the recreation leagues have been "good neighbors" who have taken an interest in improving the community.

"They have really taken an interest in both the facilities here and the people who use them," Walsh said.

Several people have considered asking the New Springville Little League to share its facilities — located on the other side of the SIDC site, near the Greenbelt — with other groups. But officials from the league, which was fearful of being evicted, are not eager to share their property.

"We're looking to expand, but I guess we'll be happy to stay at the same size if it means we can stay," Frank Ambrus, the league's president, said. "We've tried to do good things in the community, such as sponsoring drug and alcohol abuse programs, and we've earned our place here."

College officials admit it is unfortunate that some recreation leagues will have to move, but they say very little can be done to accommodate the athletes. Observers agree, but that doesn't mean they are happy about it.

"It hurts to be kicked out," Fred Giordano, head of the SAMSAN league, said. "But it hurts more to think that kids will have to suffer. It's ironic that a college will be better off, but their future students will be among the losers."

Page 2 of
2 Pages