



Gov. Mario M. Cuomo discusses the controversy over the Corson's Brook Woods with Edmund Murphy of Community Board 2 at the state Institute for Basic Research in Willowbrook.

S.I. Advance Photo by Steve Zaffarano

Cuomo joins woods debate

Gov. Mario M. Cuomo stepped into the middle of the Corson's Brook Woods controversy yesterday when he visited the site and spent an hour standing in a parking lot while debating the merits of a proposal to build four group homes in the valued woodlands.

Announcing, "We're honing in on the truth here," Cuomo asked pointed questions of both supporters and opponents of the group home proposal and promised to study the issue.

About 35 people — including city and Staten Island officials,

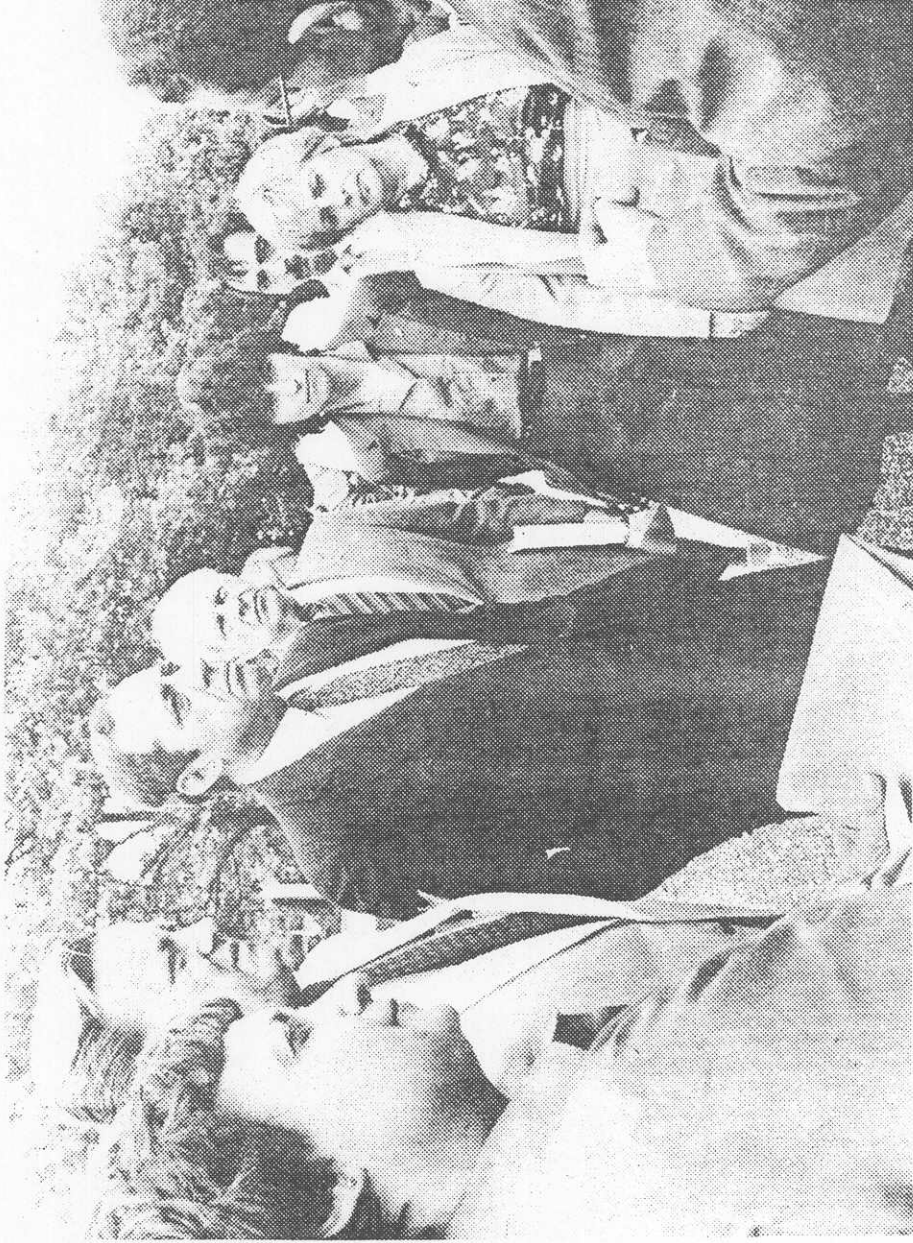
members of the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, a local environmental group, and advocates for the handicapped — met with Cuomo in the parking lot of the state Institute for Basic Research in Mental Retardation, Willowbrook, which adjoins Corson's Woods.

With Cuomo were two of his commissioners — Arthur Webb of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, the agency that wants to build the group homes, and

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Cuomo



Gov. Mario M. Cuomo, on his visit to the state Institute for Basic Research, Willowbrook, finds himself in the middle of the Corson's Brook Woods controversy.

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Henry Williams of the Department of Environmental Conservation, who says that as much of the woods should be preserved as possible.

Webb's agency wants to build the group homes to house 72 Islanders who will be leaving the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) when the facility closes in 1987. Webb claims Corson's Woods, located on Forest Hill Road in the southeast corner of the SIDC campus, is the only site that meets all the agency's criteria.

The proposal has drawn the wrath of environmentalists, who claim the tract is one of the most environmentally significant sites on the Island.

When the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) began construction of the homes in November, the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods went to court and obtained a temporary injunction. That injunction has since been overturned by an appeals court, leaving OMRDD free to build the homes.

However, in the past few weeks, OMRDD has been working to soothe the environmentalists' concerns by commissioning

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an environmental impact study, which was released this week, and scheduling a public hearing for July 1. Cuomo's visit is considered another effort by the state to show its willingness to hammer out a compromise on the issue.

The plan for yesterday's visit was for Cuomo to tour the woods, but Cuomo never left the parking lot. Instead, he pulled out a map of the SIDC campus and as people crowded around, the governor asked for a point-by-point explanation of the issues involved.

Environmentalists, led by Terence Benbow and Richard Buegler of the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, told Cuomo that the site was irreplaceable and that construction of the homes would cause irrevocable damage.

"What we want to get across to you is that this area is site-specific," Benbow said. "You can't pick up Corson's Brook Woods and put it somewhere else." He added that it was one of the most important tracts proposed for inclusion in the Greenbelt.

"There are two areas considered botanical treasure-houses on Staten Island and this is one of them," Ellen Pratt of the Protectors said. "The soil here is different, which means we get different plants than anywhere else. We're talking about something here of museum-like quality."

In questioning the site's uniqueness, Cuomo asked for names of rare species found in the woodlands. At one point, in a discussion on sweet gum trees, Cuomo turned to an aide and said, "Write this down. I want to know how many sweet gum trees are on the property, how rare they are, how many the construction would take down, whether they have to be taken down."

He also sparked debate about the number of people who use the property now as compared to the number who would use the site if the group homes were built. When an environmentalist said he had seen a total of about 200 people in the woods during his 15 to 20 visits, Cuomo noted that about the same number of mentally retarded persons and their caretakers would be enjoying the site every day if the

group homes were built.

Buegler argued that the enjoyment of the group home residents would be "significantly reduced" by the clearing of the woods for construction.

Cuomo also asked the environmentalists about alternatives, turning to Benbow and asking, "Terry, where would you put these people?"

Benbow and Thomas Paulo, manager of the Greenbelt, explained the merits of an alternate site, and Mrs. Pratt of the Protectors suggested that the search for a site be broadened to include other parts of the soon-to-be-vacated SIDC campus. However, Webb of the Office of Mental Retardation said that the group home site must adjoin a residential area so that its residents can experience community life. Moreover, he said, the proposed alternate sites are unsuitable for construction.

The alternate sites are 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 ballfields of the SIDC campus.

Heated discussion broke out over the newly-released environmental impact study, which agrees with Webb that Corson's Brook Woods is the best site for the homes. The study by the Manhattan consulting firm McKeown & Franz Inc. says that although the project will "alter the natural character" of the woodlands, the potential impact is not enough to justify relocation of the project.

"We don't believe their figures," Buegler said about the report's statement that construction would mean removal of only 160 of the 780 trees on the site. "It doesn't include saplings and underbush, for instance. Destroying that is destroying the whole integrity of an area."

Benbow told the governor that he believed that "all the concerns could be fairly met" by moving the group homes to another suitable site.

While the conversation was dominated by the environmentalists, there were supporters of the group homes on hand, including Edmund Murphy of Community Board 2. Murphy told Cuomo that "we're all for the Greenbelt," but "I don't think the handicapped should be denied access to this area."

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