

Group home report is argued at hearing

By JULIE MACK
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Conservationists slammed an environmental impact statement on the Corson's Brook Woods project last night, claiming the favorable report on the state's proposal to build four group homes in the valued woodlands contained "glaring omissions" and false information.

During an emotionally charged, four-hour public hearing on the impact study, the environmentalists also demanded that the state hold another public

hearing — but with sworn testimony and cross-examination in front of an administrative law judge.

The demands and criticisms of the environmentalists alternated with cries to build the group homes immediately. In fact, supporters of the group home project outnumbered the detractors at last night's hearing and included Rep. Guy V. Molinari, R-N.Y., and a contingency of more than 100 people representing Young Israel of Staten Island.

The hearing held at the state

Institute for Basic Research in Mental Retardation, which adjoins Corson's Woods, attracted more than 250 people, more than 60 of whom took a turn at the microphone. The hearing was sponsored by the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), which wants to build the group homes to house 72 severely mentally retarded people.

The controversy focuses on the construction site, a nine-acre

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Rep. Guy V. Molinari was among the speakers at the Willowbrook hearing who voiced support for locating the group homes at the Corson's Brook Woods site.

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tract in Corson's Brook Woods, located along Forest Hill Road in Willowbrook. Environmentalists want the 40-acre woodlands left intact as a natural preserve for inclusion in the Greenbelt.

The environmental impact statement commissioned by OMRDD and released last month concluded that the damage which would be caused by the proposed construction is not significant enough to force relocation of the project.

Molinari, who was the first speaker from the audience, said he had spent yesterday reading the environmental impact report. "The more I read, the more I wondered why there was even a controversy. I think the state has made all the accommodations that anyone could ever ask for," Molinari said, noting that OMRDD has redesigned its site plan to minimize its environmental impact.

"We are asked to give up about 200 trees. We are not talking about an endangered species. The fact is that over 600 trees would be left on the site when construction is over."

Describing himself as a conservationist, Molinari said, "There comes a time when we have to say, yes, we will sacrifice the trees, but for a hell of a good cause. ... I don't mean to take away from those who love trees, but you have to draw a line someplace. This is the time; this is the place. Put the project on the fast track and build it as fast as you can."

Those arguments were refuted by environmentalists who said they were bothered by the presentation of the issue as a "win-lose situation."

"This issue is being presented as a conflict, when it is not," said Terence Benbow of the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods. "We are in a position to serve both interests" by moving the group homes to another site.

The problem, according to Thomas Paulo, Greenbelt administrator, is that the state's environmental impact statement does



Richard Buegler

not give serious consideration to the alternate sites.

One alternate site, located adjacent to the ball fields on Forest Hill Road, was dismissed in the impact study as too small and lacking proper utility connections; Paulo says the site has the necessary connections and that the site plan could be altered to fit the smaller acreage.

Another site, located north of the Institute for Basic Research, was criticized in the impact study because of its poor soil and underground springs. Paulo said the report contains no evidence of any in-depth soil analysis. "Speculation on the soil condition is not good enough reason to dismiss it as an alternative," Paulo said. "The environmental impact statement is based on inconclusive data."

Marilyn Mammano, director of the Island office of the city Planning Department, supported Paulo's conclusions and told OMRDD officials that her office "is at your disposal at any time" to conduct more studies on the alternate sites.

Other environmentalists debated OMRDD's argument that the Corson's Brook Woods is the only suitable site that fronts a residential area. OMRDD officials say the proximity to a residential area is critical because it



Thomas Paulo

ensures that group home residents will become part of the community.

Yet OMRDD's site plan calls for a 50-foot buffer of trees between the homes and Forest Hill Road, the environmentalists noted. "What's the value of having the homes in Corson's Woods, because it is close to the community, if those homes are screened from the community?" said Joel Berger of Willowbrook.

Environmentalists urged the state to continue study on the issue before beginning construction. Some, including Richard Buegler, president of the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, suggested a hearing before an administrative law judge.

"The Protectors are not convinced" that last night's hearing sufficiently covered the issues, Buegler said, adding that his organization wants a forum that includes sworn testimony and cross-examination.

In their statements last night, the group home supporters focused on the need for the homes and emphasized the rights of the disabled. "How can we not say to these people, 'Here is the best we can offer: Take it, you deserve it?'" said Harry Friedland, chairman of the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council.



Marilyn Mammano



Alan Novetsky



Barry Friedland

Rabbi Jay Marcus of Young Israel of Staten Island said his congregation strongly supported the group home concept. "Every block surrounding the site has members of our community," said Rabbi Marcus, whose temple is located a few blocks from Corson's Woods. "We feel very strongly that these homes should be built: we're looking forward to having these people in our neighborhood and involving them in our community."

"We feel a moral and ethical responsibility to support these homes," added Dr. Alan Novetsky, president of Young Israel. "We feel destroying two acres of woods will not destroy the Greenbelt; it won't even destroy Corson's Brook Woods."

Parents of the mentally retarded were also on hand to give impassioned pleas for the group homes. "You put our children on trial," one parent raged at the environmentalists. "Go home and kiss your children tonight and tell them how you sunk a home for retarded children. And you live with that."

Some of the environmentalists expressed frustration that their views were interpreted as bias against the disabled. "No one here has suggested not building the homes," one speaker said.

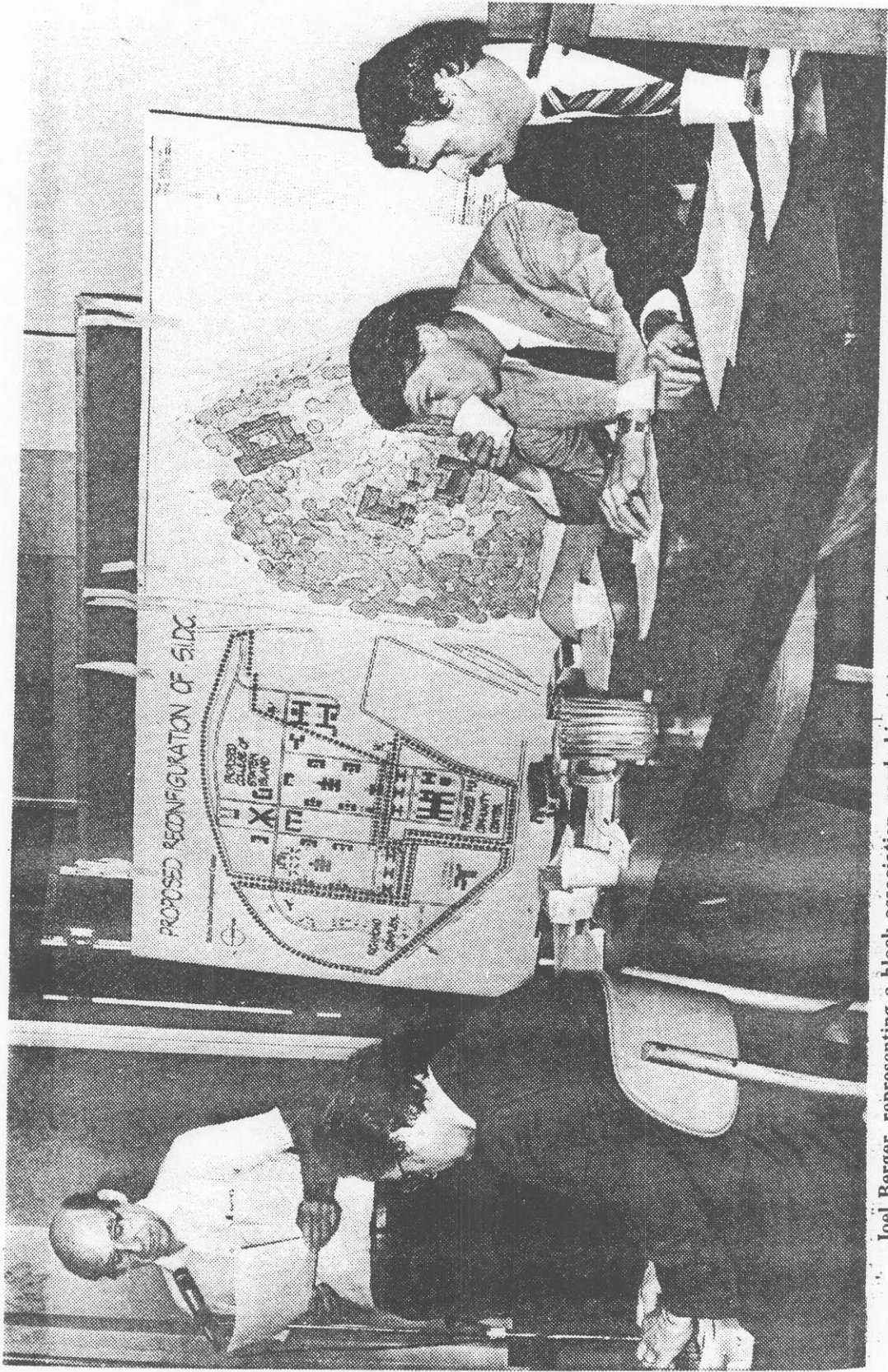
Said Sally Williams of the Sta-



Several small discussion groups form during an intermission at the hearing held at the state Institute for Basic Research in Mental Retardation, adjoining Corson's Brooks Woods.

ten Island Planning Committee: "I think we can all understand the frustration in finding homes for the mentally retarded. But that does not preclude the orderly

evaluation of sites for those facilities. It's important to have dialogue — it's difficult when the state has already taken a position — but we can do it."



Joel Berger, representing a block association, reads his statement during the hearing while officials look on.

S.I. Advance Photos by Tony Carannante