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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

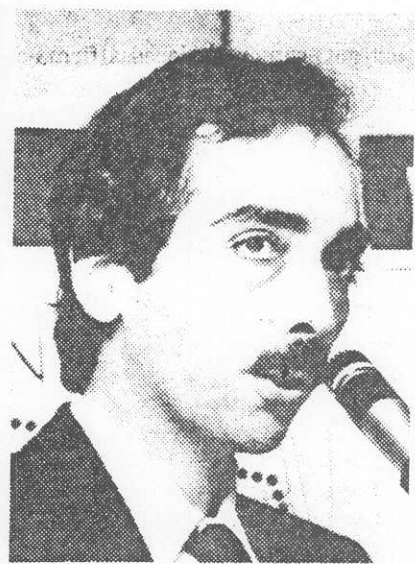
not give serious consideration to the alternate sites.

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.