

TREES VERSUS RETARDED

By MARY ENGELS

More than 300 attended a four-hour public hearing on the proposed construction of group homes for clients at the Staten Island Developmental Center that pitted environmentalists against advocates for the retarded.

Purpose of the hearing was to solicit comments from the public on the draft environmental impact statement, according to the New York State Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities at the Institute for Basic Research, 1050 Forest Hill Road, Willowbrook.

The statement prepared by the state deals with plans to establish four intermediate care facilities and a program building for resident

mentally retarded and developmentally disabled persons on the grounds of the center.

THE PROPOSED nine-acre project site, located on an undeveloped portion of the 382 acres of state-owned property near Forest Hill Road, has come under fire in recent months because a portion of the site is located in Corson's Brook Woods.

Environmentalists have claimed that the woods are "in the heart of the Greenbelt" and as such "should be protected and preserved as an environmentally significant area."

James Walsh, executive director of the Staten Island Developmental Center, set the tone for the state's position as he began the hearing, held Monday night.

Walsh noted that the location of the site "was the culmination of two years work and effort on the part of the agency to abide by the Willowbrook consent decree.

"THE DECREE," he said, "was our impetus for doing it. The decree states that the center has to change from an institutional to a residential environment for our community."

Walsh added, "In the past decade we've seen the population at the former Willowbrook State School go from 6,000 clients to its present 560.

"In the next two years we hope to see it at zero. But in order to do that every placement is imperative. Time is very important. But more important is the rights of the citizens themselves."

Walsh told the audience that these "residents will be citizens of Staten Island.

"OUR PURPOSE is to provide them with the least restrictive environment as possible in a community setting. The site we've chosen does just that."

The director said, "There is a misconception that we are not concerned about the environment and that is not true. We worked with city planners, the community board, we redesigned the architect's plans twice in response to concerns."

He noted that in the draft environmental impact statement "it states that there would be very little intrusion

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