

# 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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into the woods and no significant impact."

However, several environmentalists disagreed on this statement and most charged that the state could have sought other alternative sites.

Ellen Pratt, speaking as a member of the Council on the Environment of New York City, stated, "The environmental impact statement failed to justify destruction of this unique woodland wetland area."

A staunch Greenbelt supporter, Pratt said, "We have been informed that there are other nearby sites that can accommodate these facilities, such as the nearby Executive Way site on the land, and other open areas which would not involve removing woodlands proposed for inclusion in the Greenbelt."

Dick Buegler, president of the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, a leading Staten Island environmentalist group that took the matter to court earlier this year when it discovered "some 40 trees had been cut down in the clearing of the site for the proposed construction," said, "Protectors is not convinced that this hearing is the avenue to address the environmental concerns of Staten Islanders, relative to the planned continued destruction of the major portion of the upland mature forest of the woods."

**BUEGLER** called on the state

commissioner of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, Arthur Webb, who was present at the hearing, "to hold a regular public hearing for permit application for the intermediate care facilities of the proposed Richmond complex, not a public comment session."

Buegler charged, "A limit of three minutes per presentation does not permit the Protectors, nor any other parks agencies and organizations to examine witnesses relating to the impact statement nor to submit sworn testimony."

Paul Kietzman, counsel for the state, said, "The agency had a choice of holding a hearing or not. They were not obligated to do so."

**NEVERTHELESS**, environmentalists continued to hammer home the point that the draft environmental impact statement was "inaccurate," and "insensitive" to the concerns of the environment.

Those making the comments included Tom Paulo, Greenbelt administrator; Kathleen Kimball representing the S.I. Greenbelt Stewardship Council; John Oppenheimer of The College of Staten Island; Terence Benbow, attorney for the Protectors; Deborah Sachs, board member of the Preservation League, and others.

Advocates for the retarded such as Harry Friedland, chairman of the Staten Island Regional Retardation Developmental Council, a consortium of voluntary agency service pro-

viders, consumers, and citizens concerned with the welfare of MRDD people of all ages, said, "The Corson's Brook Woods is indeed worthy of preservation, conversely it is also worthy of providing a beautiful environment within the community for those less fortunate."

**REP. GUY Molinari** (R-C-Staten Island) said, "Staten Islanders have shed many a tear for the cutting down of trees. But there are times when we have to sacrifice a few trees for a

good cause. On behalf of the residents I appeal to the state to put this on the fast track for construction. These people have waited too long."

And Msgr. John Servodidio of Catholic Charities, summed it up by stating, "If you have to make a decision between two goods, a human being is higher than trees and animals."

A total of 55 speakers commented on the pros and cons of the proposed plan and the state will take written comments for up to 45 days.