

A day after hearing, Corson's tests spark ire

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Soil testings conducted in Corson's Brook Woods yesterday, only a day after a public hearing in which environmentalists strongly stated their objections to any construction in the woods, have sparked angry protests.

The testings indicate that the state plans to proceed with the proposed construction of four group homes in Corson's Woods, one environmentalist said, and illustrates the futility of Monday's hearing.

"I'm in a total state of shock," said Ellen Pratt, a member of

several Island environmental groups. "The day after the hearing, when there's another 15 days that they are accepting comment, out they go" to conduct soil tests.

The environmentalists, led by members of the Protectors of Pine Oak Woods, are trying to convince the state to relocate the group home project. The agency that wants to build the homes, the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), sponsored the public hearing to allow the opposition to air its concerns. OMRDD said it would consider the comments before proceeding with construc-

tion.

But yesterday's work in the woods may indicate that OMRDD does not plan to give serious consideration to the environmentalists' objections, said Richard Buegler, president of the Protectors. "It (the soil tests) is an indication that they are going ahead" with construction.

OMRDD wants to build the group homes to house 72 severely retarded people who are to leave Staten Island Developmental Center. The agency claims that Corson's Woods, located in the southeast corner of the SIDC campus along Forest Hill Road, is the only site at SIDC suitable for construction which fronts a residential area.

The project would involve a nine-acre parcel of the woods, which cover 40 acres. Environmentalists claim the tract is one of Staten Island's best natural woodlands, and want the woodlands preserved for inclusion in the Greenbelt.

SIDC Director James Walsh acknowledged that the timing of yesterday's soil testings was "unfortunate." "I wasn't even aware it was going to be happening," he added, noting that the testings were arranged by the state Facilities Development Corp. "I can understand why people would perceive that this means we are

proceeding with construction."

But in fact, he said, the construction has been delayed to allow OMRDD time to evaluate testimony presented at Monday's hearing, and a final determination on the site has not yet been made. Walsh added, however, that OMRDD still hopes to build the homes at Corson's Woods, which is why the soil tests were conducted.

"As far as the agency is concerned, we have determined that

is the most desirable site," he said. "But a final decision will be made in about six weeks."

Walsh added that the decision will be reviewed by Gov. Mario Cuomo's office. Cuomo visited the woods last month and talked with environmentalists about their objections.

In addition to the implications of the testings, Buegler said he was concerned about the damage from yesterday's work. "A truck came into the site itself and

crushed down the vegetation," he said. A "tractor-like vehicle" brought in by the truck is "completing damaging" the underbrush, he added.

"The problem with the state has been that they have never let us know what is happening beforehand," Buegler said. "We find out only indirectly; we can only respond to their actions and not to their planning. We wonder what else they are planning that nobody knows about."