

—Editorial Page—

*Our opinion/*

# Keep ball fields public

Consider the great American pastime of baseball. A noble game, a great game. And one of the greatest things about it is how little it takes to actually play: players, of course, equipment, and a field. Talent is optional.

Throwing together 18 players (or 14, in a pinch) is easy. Equipment is a breeze; every American male over the age of 8 has a bat, ball and glove. But finding a field ... well, sometimes that's a problem.

There are plenty of ball fields on Staten Island, from North Shore to South Shore. The trouble is they haven't kept up with the population boom. While the number of Island residents has nearly doubled in the past 20 years, the number of ball fields has remained relatively constant.

You needn't be Peter Ueberroth to know what that means.

Staten Island has a baseball field shortage. For every team that uses an Island ball field, there is probably another team that would like to, but can't. The crunch, especially during the peak hours on weekends and evenings, is indeed that bad.

It would be ideal if Staten Island could add ball fields, but that won't happen soon, if at all. At the very least, we cannot afford to lose any. In a borough starved for recreational facilities, that would be a tragedy.

With that in mind, consider the College of Staten Island's proposal for the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook.

As part of its master plan for a new campus, the college expects to take over the several existing ball fields there. On that site, the college will build a sports complex, for use by its own student athletes. Regardless of what the college promises, it cannot be expected that ordinary people off the streets will be allowed unlimited use of the facilities.

If that were the extent of the college's plan, it would be flatly unacceptable. The ball fields at the developmental center are heavily used by the public, and their loss could not be taken lightly.

Fortunately, there is more to the plan than that. The college proposes building five new ball fields where the developmental center's outdated power plant is now located. Those fields, the college promises, would be open to the public after school hours and would be sufficient to replace the existing fields.

So far, so good. The one element missing from this plan, however, is public control. Although the college promises to let the public use its fields, it is far from a sure thing. College officials could, at any time, rescind that promise and keep the fields for themselves.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly offers a reasonable compromise. She proposes that the five new fields be placed under the jurisdiction of the city Parks Department. That way, the college gets the sports complex it needs and the public gets the ball fields it needs. Everyone wins.

The Parks Department has previously said it would be willing to run the ball fields at Willowbrook. All that remains is a formal OK by the department and the college.

It's not that we don't trust the college. We do. We assume it is sincere when it offers public access to the new ball fields. But that does not ensure that future college administrations will feel the same way, and before we give away several perfectly good (and greatly demanded) ball fields, we must be sure that replacement fields will be available. Not just now, but indefinitely.

Mrs. Connelly's Parks Department plan would do just that. We urge the college to accept it.