

# State drops Corson's housing plan

By DAN JANISON  
and DENISE RINALDO  
ADVANCE STAFF WRITERS

ALBANY — The state has agreed to drop its controversial plan to build housing for the mentally retarded in Corson's Brook Woods in Willowbrook.

State officials announced the move yesterday, capping a two-year civic battle that put conservationists and advocates for the retarded on opposing sides

and led Gov. Mario M. Cuomo to become directly involved.

The state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) abandoned the stalled construction as part of what it called a "comprehensive plan" for its services in the borough.

That plan calls for a special residence, at a site on the Island yet to be named, where the state would place 24 people whom

judges in criminal cases order into the custody of OMRDD.

Lou Ganim, spokesman for OMRDD chief Arthur Webb, said this new "secure unit" would be like one already operating in Rochester. The state runs two other secure facilities as well, in Westchester and Brooklyn.

In addition, Cuomo operations director Henrik Dullea said the plan calls for 117 bed spaces in state-operated community resi-

dences by a year from now, an increase of 30 beds.

Twenty-four bed spaces would have gone in the disputed area, which is adjacent to the SIDC and, conservationists argued, part of the Greenbelt. The developmental center is slated to close in a year.

Early reaction to the overall plan was mixed. Privately, some officials expect close questioning of state officials as to how the secure facility would work.

On the woodland issue, reaction was predictable, with the Protectors of the Pine Oak Woods and city Parks Commissioner Henry Stern cheering and their opponents more somber.

In a statement, OMRDD said it also plans to establish:

- Residential units with 48 new beds on Executive Way of the SIDC property. As reflected previous budget documents, this would involve building three

small housing units at the site.

- A 72-bed unit at the South Beach Psychiatric Center for individuals with multiple disabilities, such as emotional and mental disorders. Cuomo requested money for the unit in budget amendments last month.

- "A multipurpose community treatment center to provide a range of day and recreational pro-

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grams for clients in state and voluntary provider residences." Planning funds have also been requested by Cuomo.

"It's a wonderful sign of state support for the Greenbelt," Commissioner Stern said, referring to the natural acreage legally protected and sought to be protected from development in the mid-Island and South Shore.

"How could we have gone to private owners and asked them to give us easements and spare the land and help us with the Greenbelt when the state itself was enacting its own chainsaw massacre?" Stern added.

State contractors had removed several trees in the woods before the Protectors group went to court and a long dispute followed. The issue became a celebrated cause for Staten Island conservationists.

"We assumed it had to go this way because it has taken so long," said Richard Buegler, leader of the Protectors of the Pine Oak Woods. "We'd assumed some way the plans have changed."

"This is what we have wanted for a long time. It shows wisdom and foresight by the commissioner and the governor's office. They've tried to take into account the larger community," Buegler said.

"What's nice about it is that

everyone can get back to work," pursuing the needs of the retarded and the Greenbelt, "without a cloud hanging over us."

On the other side, Assembly Mental Health Committee Chairwoman Elizabeth Connelly, D-West Brighton, said, "There will always be a cloud" resulting from the decision.

"The issue is not trees," said Mrs. Connelly, who last year had a state Greenbelt funding request placed on hold pending outcome

of the Corson's Brook fight.

"The principle is that they (environmentalists) did not want to have a defeat because it would be a sign of weakness, that they'd be vulnerable in the future," she said.

Mrs. Connelly, who played a direct role in talks that produced the plan, stood in favor of the 24-bed secure facility, and said she expects state Sen. John Marchi to support its placement.

"Where are you going to put (the residents)? In a jail? There

are some who think they should go there," Mrs. Connelly said.

At the same time, she indicated that the Cuomo administration had made several new agreements regarding services for the retarded. Initially, she said, she was told she would need to lobby for the multipurpose treatment center, but the administration has now carried that goal as its own.

Further, the latest administration plan sets aside 170 acres on the SIDC grounds for services for

the retarded and disabled, up from 90 in an earlier request from SIDC's administrator.

In a prepared statement, Webb, who at one point had threatened to sue the Protectors group, said of the Corson's Brook Woods:

"Although the work that had been done to prepare an environmental impact statement did not preclude construction in Corson's Brook Woods, the review process did raise enough concerns that the governor felt there was a need to re-examine alternatives."

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