

SIDC carousel repair plan grinds to halt

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Like the colorful horses frozen in mid-stride, the fate of the now-still carousel on the grounds of the former Staten Island Development Center hangs in limbo and a move to repair it has hit a snag.

Surrounded now by weeds and the empty buildings of the former Willowbrook State School, the carousel once provided a cheery facade of normalcy to passersby unaware of the degrading warehousing of 6,000 retarded people there — a situation exposed in the 1970s.

The carousel has been still for at least the three years that the SIDC has been closed down and most of the land transferred to the College of Staten Island. The state Developmental Disabilities Services Office (DDSO), which remains on 175 of the Willowbrook acres and still owns the carousel, was considering moving it to DDSO grounds for use by clients in its group homes and resource center.

But if the carousel won't turn, the move may not happen. And so far, DDSO maintenance workers have determined the ride is not operating.

"I haven't been able to find anyone to see how much it might cost to fix it," Robert Witkowsky, DDSO director, said yesterday in a phone interview. A cost estimate is needed before he can decide whether to keep the carousel, sell it or give it away.

Witkowsky said his next move is to call the owner of the South Beach Amusement Park, where Staten Island's only other carousel is still turning, for contacts or ideas.

Two local carousel lovers called Witkowsky after a story on the carousel's condition appeared in the Advance in June, each offering ideas for reclaiming the ride, he said.

Lisa Pisano of Huguenot even inspected the outside of the carousel. "I'd say it's going to take a couple of thousand dollars, not including paint," to make it usable, she said yesterday.

A carousel buff since she rode a 1914 model with wooden horses at the Keansburg, N.J., amusement park as a child, she gave Witkowsky the address of Chance Amusements in Wichita, Kan., which she says manufactures the model owned by the DDSO.

"They would have any and all parts they would need, and instruction manuals," Miss Pisano said. She also suggested Witkowsky contact the Carousel Association magazine to solicit donations of parts or service.

The carousel needs mechanical repairs, repainting and new floor boards, according to Miss Pisano, "and maybe somebody could donate brass poles. The poles it has are chrome."

The carousel is the second to be owned by the state at the site. The first, a larger carousel with colorful wooden horses and music that played as it turned, was acquired 35 years ago, but fell into disrepair in the 1970s. It was scooped up by a collector and replaced with the present carnival-type machine.

Witkowsky has said a couple of upstate DDSOs were interested in taking the carousel if the Staten Island office doesn't use it, but shipping the machine that far may be impractical.

Miss Pisano hopes only that the carousel will not be junked, she's ready to assist in painting and restoring it.

"Whoever gets it, I want to help," she said.