

Asbestos job under way for CSI

By **DON GROSS**
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Work on the multimillion dollar asbestos abatement project at the new home of the College of Staten Island (CSI) has hit full stride, two months after workers began moving specialized testing equipment onto grounds that once housed the infamous Willowbrook State School.

John Behan, a spokesman for the TDX Construction Co., the firm managing the \$400 million construction project, said asbestos removal is now under way at four buildings and a fifth is being prepared for removal of the cancer-causing substance.

This, he said, leaves another 25 buildings to undergo the arduous and expensive process of removing a material once used freely as a fire retardant and pipe insulation.

Of the 30 buildings on the 200 acres to be used by CSI — out of 300 that made up the Willowbrook grounds — 10 will remain standing and converted to use as administration and classroom buildings while the rest are torn down.

Once the buildings are cleansed of the substance known to cause cancer and asbestosis, a lung disease that makes breathing increasingly difficult, the network of steam tunnels beneath the ground will have to go through the same, highly-regulated process.

While the bulk of the work will be done by the end of January, according to Behan, some of it, such as the tunnels and the power house buildings that still provide steam to the buildings used by the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, won't be done until alternate sources of steam are provided for those buildings off CSI land.

The difficulty of the project and

the expense have all helped to drive up the cost of the project. When first announced, the cost of asbestos removal was estimated at \$3 million. But figures made available in February from the City University of New York, of which CSI is a branch, pegged the cost of asbestos removal at \$18.1 million. This estimate was based on a report by Testwell Craig Laboratories, a consulting firm specializing in asbestos removal.

Mark S. Moran, a senior code administrator with the state Dormitory Authority, said the actual cost of removing the asbestos won't be known until the final contracts are awarded.

Moran, whose job it is to oversee asbestos abatement statewide for the authority, said instead of awarding one contract to one firm for the removal project, several small contracts will be put out for bid. Each contract, he said, will consist of removing asbestos from three or four buildings.

Complicating the cost estimates is that "asbestos removal involves more than just ripping out contaminated sections of the buildings," Moran said. In most of the buildings, he said, asbestos was used in the plaster mix in the ceilings and in the floor tiles.

Common use of asbestos all but stopped during the 1970s when studies showed exposure to the smallest amount of the substance could cause health problems.

For this reason asbestos abatement is "regulated to death," Moran said.

Asbestos removal from public buildings involves conformance with federal, state and city regulations that cover every step of the procedure from preparations for the work to disposal in special landfills.

Before work can begin, Moran

said, all government agencies have to be notified the work is going to take place. The city Board of Education was sued Tuesday by the federal Environmental Protection Agency for allegedly failing to file the proper notifications.

Moran emphasized that compliance with the regulations isn't something left to chance. In addition to government regulators having the right to conduct inspections and shut the project down if anything is amiss, the Dormitory Authority has a consultant monitor the project and visit the interiors of all the buildings every week.

While Moran said Dormitory Authority workers can't follow the asbestos disposal trucks to landfills, they do have a system that prevents the carter from taking a side trip to an illegal dump site — a crimp seal is used to close the truck that must be returned to Testwell Craig by the landfill operator.

Asked whether the asbestos removal problems might have been averted if CSI did not build a new campus or by building from the ground up on the Ocean Breeze site also owned by the Dormitory Authority, Moran said: "No. Once asbestos has been disturbed, it can't be allowed to remain."

Deteriorating conditions would have forced the work anyway, he said. In Building Two, the site of the former Halloran Hospital, a facility used to treat wounded World War II servicemen, rain coming through the roof has caused the partial collapse of some floors.

"This work would have had to be done anyway," he said.