

Increased police patrols have stemmed the action, and the park's renovation will involve closing the Victory Boulevard entrance to discourage the dealers.

Willowbrook Park will also be getting six new tennis courts, and a new gravel topping for its traditionally axle-destructive roads. The \$1.2 million project will also put an asphalt pedestrian walkway around the edge of the lake, making it accessible to the handicapped.

The park's 180 acres were purchased in 1928, and Willowbrook Pond, covering five acres, was actually the first man-made lake ever built on Staten Island. It was constructed in 1932 by then-Parks Commissioner John J. O'Rourke, who planned the lake on the site of an old swamp.

Now, the lake itself will be dredged and a new 30-car parking lot will be added. Future phases of the renovation may also include re-doing the park's log cabin-style

boathouse.

Walking through the old Willowbrook State School a short distance away, one almost expects to see tumbleweed blowing around the abandoned buildings and fields.

#### CSI on the way

But big plans are in place for the sprawling facility, where the College of Staten Island is set to occupy 216 acres on a new unified campus.

CSI will renovate 16 existing buildings and build 520,000 square feet of new space. Nine existing buildings will be torn down to make way for the new college.

The state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) will retain 140 acres of Willowbrook's land, from which it will run the borough's support services for the handicapped.

Also staying will be the Richmond Complex, a colony of three

group homes, which serves 115 clients, located off Forest Hill Road. The property also houses the Elizabeth A. Connelly Community Resource Center, which serves 70 profoundly retarded clients with behavioral problems.

But to most Islanders, the sprawling complex of ~~and~~ brick buildings will always be known simply as "Willowbrook."

During the mid-1960s, more than 6,000 residents, the quarters of them multi-handicapped, were housed there. Willowbrook State School at its peak employed more than 4,000 staffers, making it the single largest employer on the Island. But staff-to-patient ratios were woefully low, between 1 to 30 and 1 to 40.

In 1965, the late Sen. Robert F. Kennedy toured Willowbrook and was appalled at the conditions there. But it wasn't until the early 1970s that the real push for reform came, leading in 1975 to the Willowbrook Consent Decree.

That ruling approved by a federal judge and signed by then Gov. Hugh Carey, mandated the movement of all but 250 of Willowbrook's residents out into smaller, community-based group homes. The initial deadline for accomplishing this was 1976, but resistance in the community to group homes caused several changes in that deadline.

In 1981, there were still 900 residents in the facility. It wasn't until April 1986 that the target population of 250 had been reached.

In January 1981, Willowbrook State School officially became the Staten Island Developmental Center, and since then, the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Service Office (SIDDSO).

SIDDSO is responsible for referring any Staten Islander with developmental disabilities to the appropriate program here.

Up on Forest Hill Road nearby is the imposing concrete and glass structure housing the Institute for Basic Research in Mental Retardation. With more than 250 employees and a \$15 million-plus annual budget, it is the only facility in the state devoted solely to researching mental retardation and developmental disabilities.

Over the years, IBR's staff has made scientific advances towards finding cures for autism, Down's Syndrome, Fragile X syndrome and Alzheimer's disease, among others.

The potential offered by the proximity of all these facilities hasn't been lost on Rabbi Jay Marcus, the energetic leader of Young Israel.

#### Young Israel growing

Among other things, Rabbi Marcus says he wants to set up a program in the congregation for children suffering from cerebral palsy. And he hopes to see a Jewish Studies Program at the new CSI when that opens.

"It's ridiculous how many of our young people I have to send over to Baruch (College) or Yeshiva."

These days, Young Israel is busy caring for 90 Russian Jews who have been staying at the old Conca D'Oro hotel in Mariners Harbor, part of a larger contingent that fled the Soviet Union in early October.

By mobilizing Young Israel's vast energy and resources to their aid, ~~he~~ confident, he'll be able to help most of the Russians find housing and work in the area.

Rabbi Marcus said he was just completing his rabbinical studies at Yeshiva University when his wife Barbara first spotted that small advertisement in the Jewish Press, back in the late 1960s.

A rabbinical position in Toronto was also available, but Mrs. Marcus prevailed on her husband Jay to join the 100 applicants for the job at the tiny new congregation on Staten Island.

"Like most new rabbis, I rented first," Rabbi Marcus recalls. "You never know how these things will work out. When I first came here, I had the occasional circumcision or bar mitzah. Now I could have 30 weddings."

Initially, Young Israel services were conducted in members' homes. A small cinderblock synagogue was built in 1967, and on April 5, 1981, Young Israel connected it to its large, new synagogue, complete with a banquet-size reception hall, classrooms for its pre-schoolers, and a gym for both rabbis and synagogue members alike.

"We didn't lay the tile ourselves," said Rabbi Marcus. "But we painted and we swept. You could say it was built with the sweat of the people here."

The congregation now even hosts its own Jewish Little League for its youngsters, whose Sabbath observance always prevented them from participating in organized Little League.

Often, residents of modern middle-class communities like Willowbrook are vilified for their lack of community spirit and purpose. That doesn't seem true in this community, where church and school seem to dominate the daily social fabric.

Perhaps the fact that so many of Willowbrook's residents are still there, 25 years after they came over the new bridge to find their American dream, is the best testament to the area's appeal.

Rabbi Marcus, for one, says he wouldn't leave Willowbrook "for anywhere on earth."

"It's the people. They're college educated. They believe in society; they believe that Judaism has an important message to offer. Outside of Israel, it's the best place to be."

The Advance has already profiled the following towns:

Travis, Great Kills, Port Richmond, Annadale, Castleton Corners/Melers Corners, Emerson Hill, St. George, Charleston, New Brighton, New Springville, South Beach, Concord, Tottenville, Mariners Harbor, Oakwood, Stapleton, Westerleigh, Huguenot, Richmond, Fort Wadsworth, Livingston, New Dorp, Eltingville, Todt Hill, Clifton and Willowbrook.

Next week's article looks at Dongan Hills.

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