

Redoing Welfare Island

The best thing that could happen to the city's Welfare Island study would be to put a rocket under the project and get it going.

But first a small rocket should be sent up in praise of the report. It is a clear, candid, thoroughly researched evaluation of the innumerable proposals entertained over the years for this prime bit of underdeveloped city land. The study committee consisted of four ex officio members of the city administration and eighteen private citizens of mixed interests, powers and talents, bound together by a role of community leadership and common commitment to New York.

If this alone were not uncommon enough, the treatment of Welfare Island as a uniquely valuable city resource is also notable. It is not long since Welfare Island was looked on primarily as an institutional dumping ground or a potentially top piece of profitable real estate to be wrested from city ownership. Most uncommon of all, the report's recommendations are made in a dozen succinct pages, backed by detailed analysis.

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The committee, appointed by Mayor Lindsay last year and headed by Benno C. Schmidt, found that planners' long-standing dreams of moving the existing hospitals off the island would be so enormously costly to carry out that the buildings are going to stay for the foreseeable future. Their report also points out that the city's two primary needs—housing and open space—are in direct conflict, and that neither need can be satisfied to any significant degree by Welfare Island.

The recommendations, therefore, are for a mixed-use plan that would integrate the isolated hospitals into a new community with housing and services for about 16,000 people, preserving as much park and recreational land as possible. That open land might have a Tivoli theme, and serve the city as a whole. The report asks for the retention and reuse of historic stone structures that now stand in desolation; it also urges a master plan and housing of the highest quality of design.

The committee suggests the new State Urban Development Corporation as one way of getting the job done. That agency, after considerable reluctance to dip its toes in New York's muddled political and environmental waters, is willing to get involved in this project. The potential of positive achievement under such an arrangement is far greater than the dangers of the state-city power game.

In this city at war with itself the whole proposal is going to have rough sledding. What it offers, however, cuts across special interests—a set of guidelines for the creative, humane development of one of the city's most remarkable resources in terms of immediate and future needs.

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And while we're doing over Welfare Island, why not rechristen it for Franklin D. Roosevelt? It would be a long overdue remembrance.