

Halfway house protests aired

By WALTER COLEMAN

Members of the Livingston Community Association and the Randall Manor Civic Association objected last night to the manner in which a halfway house for mentally retarded persons in New Brighton was purchased.

Though generally supporting the concept, members said they thought the Willowbrook Developmental Center had "gone behind" their backs in buying the structure at 200 Tysen St.

In a sometimes heated discussion, they told representatives of Willowbrook that the purchase should have been brought to the attention of the community before it was made.

"The feeling here is that we oppose the way in which it was done, not what you are doing," Henry Jolin told the members.

Albert P. Robidoux, chief of community services at Willowbrook, admitted the mistakes of the past, but told the group "we can't go back.

"We are trying to do a good thing," he said.

Speaking to a packed house in the park building in Waker Park, Robidoux said the facility would house 10 residents, eight of whom would be from Willowbrook.

Two of the persons in the three-story, 13-room house would be from the community who had never been in the state institution.

Robidoux added that the residents from Willowbrook would all have ties to Staten Island.

"It is basically a step between the institution and the community," he said, noting that some of the residents had spent up to 30 years in Willowbrook.

There will be a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week staff of eight, he continued, to care for the basic needs of the residents, who will be mildly to moderately retarded, with IQs from the mid-50s. to about 70.

All persons living in the facility will be over 21.

When asked if the house will present a fire hazard, Robidoux said no residents will live above the third floor and that all city specifications will be met.

Jolin, however, said to the Willowbrook representatives that the groups had been trying "to preserve our communities" and that representatives of the institution should have come to the community.

"This community has worked with all agencies," he said.

Mrs. George Memoly,

president of the Randall Manor Women's Club, told the group she thought the "concept is admirable" but that the community groups should have been consulted.

"You have come at a time when we have reached the saturation point" as far as institutions go, she said.

The Staten Island Mental Health Society and the North Richmond Community Mental Health Center both came to the groups before going ahead with a project, she noted.

Robidoux pointed out, along with other representatives, that he thought the community had been alerted when plans were presented at the borough president's office and when he went to a Community Board 2 meeting last March to discuss the project, though only in general terms.

Dr. Sandor Friedman, while calling the plan admirable, said the problem now is one of trust on the part of the state and the community.

He said that for years, the state has done everything wrong at Willowbrook. "Why should we assume that the state is right this time" about the way to handle mentally handicapped persons.

Since the state has done so much wrong, he continued, it should be anxious to persuade the community that it is now doing the right thing and "not go through the back door."

His third point, he said, was that the state now "has put the onus on us" if they did not support the facility, since it

would be thought that they were against the mentally retarded.

He asked the representatives what guarantees they were going to give the community and what would happen to the house when all the persons in Willowbrook who can use it are out.

Robidoux said he could offer no guarantees. Yvonne Paine, who works with the community service of Willowbrook said the house could be used to assist the 9,000 retarded persons living on the Island but not at Willowbrook.

Robert Parsons, a registered nurse with the Willowbrook unit, noted that the group had a contract with the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital in Clifton to treat any illness arising among the residents.

Vincent Murphy, a community resident, said that when Willowbrook opened up, the state said the maximum age of anyone in the institution would be 14.

"I just recently carried a 60-year-old man out of there," he continued, pointing out that he was then told that the 14 had referred to the intellectual age of the persons.

In an impassioned plea, Parsons told the group that they would have to keep the Willowbrook concept if a better one could not be found.

"Let us show the state that we don't need a Willowbrook. We are talking about the rehabilitation of residents into productive citizens, who will represent no cost to the state and present no burden."

Citing Kleins Forest Manor, which he charged is illegally housing mentally ill patients without proper supervision, and the New Brighton Nursing Home, Dr. Friedman suggested that the Willowbrook representatives go back to the state and "end the problem."

Miss Paine then suggested that he was using the home, originally built as an old-age domiciliary center, "as a pawn." Friedman denied it.

Both he and Murphy demanded that the representatives put

the various aspects of how the facility will be run in writing.

"If you are honest with us," Murphy said, "You will put it in writing."

Robidoux said he would present copies of the plans on how the home will be run. "I have already said it is not final and I hope for your input," he continued.

James Callaghan, of Port Richmond told the group he would be happy to have the halfway house there.

He mentioned other centers, such as Daytop Village, that had met with community opposition at first, but had later become part of the community.

Robidoux added that the average stay in the half-way house would be from eight to 12 months and that it would also be used by parents of retarded persons to take care of their children in emergency situations.

The group also heard from representatives of the North Richmond Community Mental Health Center and the psychiatric unit of St. Vincent's Medical Center, who are planning a new building on the hospital grounds.

Dr. Sheldon Blackman, director of research for the health center, said it would have 35 beds and that the entrance used for the Mental Health Society, guilding off Castleton Ave. would be used.

He added that the center and hospital would attempt to "demap" Kissell Ave., allowing them to build the unit further from surrounding houses.

The community groups, hospital and center agreed to meet again to work on the plans for the building.