

Group home nixed after 2-year effort

By ROBERT MIRALDI

An agency which has been seeking for two years to establish a group home for retarded Staten Island residents has been shot down again—this time after receiving a preliminary approval from a state architect.

The approval, says one state official, was a "mistake," and never should have been given to the Volunteers of America for a hostel it had wished to develop at 30-32 Westervelt Ave., New Brighton.

But the thumbs-down from the state Department of Mental Hygiene has the hostel planners perplexed, angry and frustrated after a two-year search which has included viewing almost 100 buildings in pursuit of Staten Island's second hostel for the retarded.

The turn-down also comes at a time when the state is attempting to depopulate its 20 developmental centers for the retarded and expand the current network of community-based group homes to include 26 new facilities in the city.

Only one of those facilities will be on Staten Island, explains Mrs. Barbara Blum, director of the month-old Metropolitan Placement Unit. "If the Westervelt Ave. facility is workable," she says, "we want it to go through."

At this point the Westervelt

group home looks bleak because, state officials say, the building is about nine feet too high, at least four feet too narrow and would cost too much to rehabilitate.

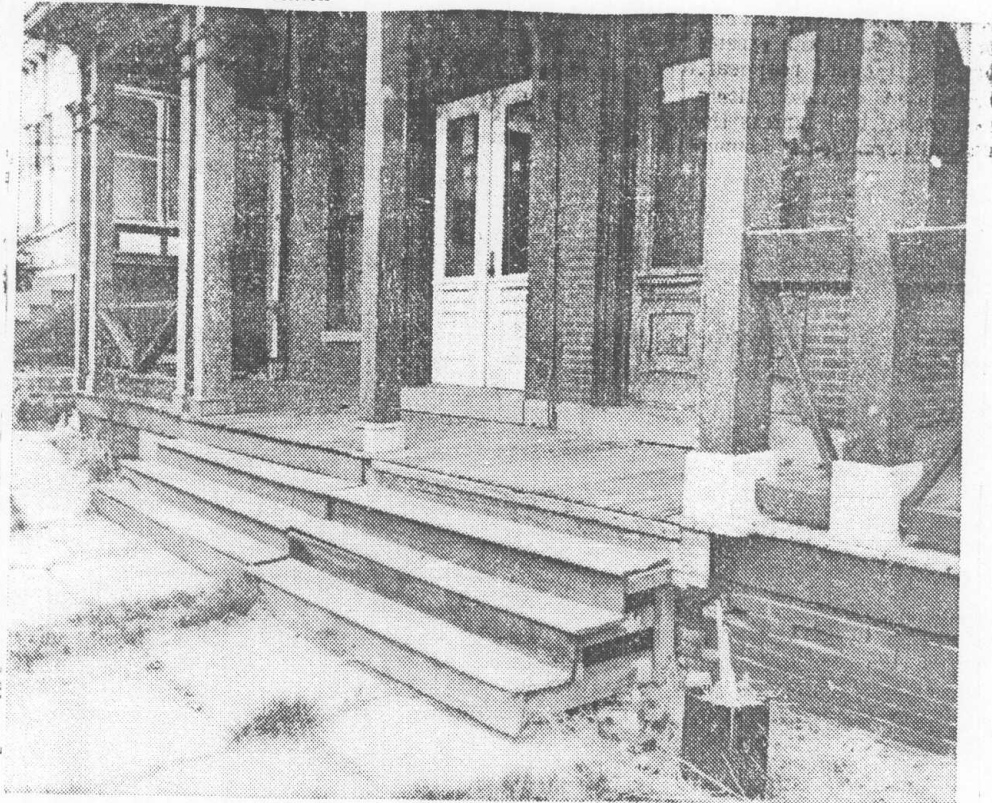
Different officials give different views and figures, however.

Meanwhile, says Mrs. Beatrice Victor, chairman of the Staten Island Retardation and Disability Council, there are almost 8,000 retarded Staten

Islanders who "terribly" need this hostel—a permanent group residence for 12 persons.

City officials estimate that there will be a need for about 30 group homes here. Thus far, a home at 200 Tysen St., New Brighton, is the Island's lone home for the retarded.

"This is the second time the state has suddenly withdrawn



Rickety steps and a broken-down porch will add to the repair work for the Westervelt group home. How much money repairs will total may decide the fate of the proposed facility.

S.I. Advance Photo by Barry Schwartz

its approval," says Mrs. Victor, pointing to what she feels are technicalities. "If we go by the book, I suspect many of these facilities will never go up."

"I think the state is making stupidity a virtue," says Robert Piegari, administrator of the Staten Island Developmental Disability Clinic and an activist in the hostel plan.

"You can't imagine how bad people in the state Department of Mental Hygiene felt about this," says James Boothby, former state hostel programmer. "There were a lot of upset stomachs. But there are more than building code problems with this building."

The problems began on Dec. 29, 1974, when the Volunteers of America, a Manhattan charitable group, announced plans to develop and administer a hostel on the North Shore of Staten Island.

The group was in the process of obtaining final approval for use of an old convent in West Brighton. The deal fell through when the state nixed the wood-frame building. The search went on.

Finally, about a year ago, the Westervelt building—three stories of brick with a backyard—was located. According to Boothby, the Volunteers wanted to lease the building from landlord Isadore Ronenson of New Brighton and the state would pay half the costs. The lease, says Ronenson, would call for an \$11,000 yearly rental.

In fall 1975 the Department of Mental Hygiene sent down an architect, Andrew Crowe, to inspect the facility, see if it met city and state building codes. Crowe gave the Volunteers the go-ahead, say the hostel planners.

They went ahead and sought community approval—and received an endorsement from the St. Mark's Civic Association, the area civic group. Furthermore, they laid the groundwork for community board approval by consulting and informing the board's leaders about the project.

Plans began to crumble when a second inspection took place on Feb. 24-25 by a trio of inspectors from the Facilities Development Corp.

Landlord Ronenson received a letter dated March 3 from Boothby. The second inspection, Boothby said, revealed 12 "deficiencies," and "it does not appear that the necessary renovations are possible...."

"I just threw up my hands in disgust," says Ronenson.

"Wouldn't the first inspection have shown the deficiencies?" asks Mrs. Victor. "One would think so, wouldn't one?"

The inspection revealed that:

¶ The building height was 49 feet, six inches. Maximum height for multiple dwelling group homes is 40 feet. "That's certainly a technicality," says Mrs. Blum. "It's ridiculous," says Piegari.

Could it be waived? "It could be," says Boothby, "but I would doubt it."

¶ The side yard at No. 32 is three feet, seven inches; minimum is five feet for 30-foot buildings. The building is too narrow.

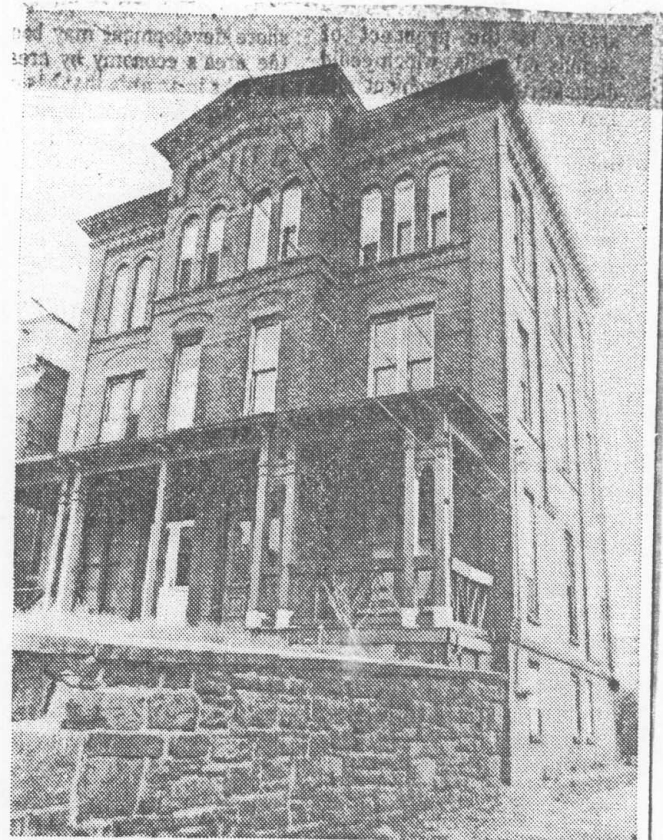
¶ The 65-year-old building needs new roofing, stairways, back and front porches, new wiring and new floors.

Ronenson insists that the estimated cost for the rehabilitation was \$50-60,000. "No way," says Boothby. More like \$100,000, he says, almost double the worth of the building. "It's tough enough to justify \$50,000 worth of taxpayer money, but \$100,000 is just too much."

The rehabilitation "cannot be justified," Boothby said in his March 3 letter. Mrs. Blum says that \$50,000 in repairs is a workable figure, but just barely.

She says she has sent a letter to the Facilities Development Corp., asking for an "urgent basis" reappraisal and new inspection of Westervelt Ave.

If the cost is still upwards of \$100,000, however, the search by the Volunteers of American will continue. Hostel No. 2 for Staten Island will be back on the planning boards.



This three-story, red-brick building at 30-32 Westervelt Ave. is approximately nine feet too high for use as a group home for the retarded, the state says.

S.I. Advance Photo by Barry Schwartz