

Experts split on effect of group homes

By MARY BETH PFEIFFER

It may all be in the mind of the consumer, but group homes — whether they house mentally retarded or socially-maladjusted youths — can send the value of neighboring homes diving as much as 10 per cent, according to five Island real estate appraisers.

Research reports, on the other hand, performed in areas of the country that began the shift to group homes years before the Willowbrook Developmental Center was ordered to do so, show otherwise. Group homes have little effect on property pricetags and turnover rates, they say.

The two conclusions are about as disparate as they can be.

But there is one point real estate appraisers and advocates of the retarded cannot argue with. Group homes on Staten Island, assuming they are well-maintained, can be a blight only if neighboring residents supply an atmosphere to allow that to happen.

"Unfortunately, the psychological effect of this type of facility definitely has an adverse effect," says Vincent Zaloom, a senior residential appraiser on Staten Island. Agreeing with him are five other appraisers interviewed, all of whom admit they have never appraised a home with a group home nearby.

Advocates of the retarded, meanwhile, who are attempting to fulfill a federal court order to reduce Willowbrook's population to 250 by 1981, heartily disagree.

Pointing to experience with and research on group home impact, they say homes sold near group homes have sold at rates equal to those in control areas. Neighbors of firmly-established facilities find little objectionable about them, they add.

They say, too, that appraisers are as misinformed as the general public on the question of property value-group home relationship. Appraisers, mean-

while, say they base their opinion on knowing what makes a house sell, and what doesn't.

"For the average person, it's logical to assume property values will drop with group homes. The actual effect on a neighborhood is nil," says Anthony Capaiulo, director of a Westchester informational group involved in the orderly development of group facilities.

Studies performed in Lansing, Mich.; White Plains, N.Y., and Green Bay, Wis., support Capaiulo's belief.

In a report prepared last October by the Lansing Planning Department — after the agency was swamped with 12 requests for group home permits in four months — researchers could find no "relationship between halfway houses and foster care homes and property values."

The 22-page documented study also charted neighborhood changes in areas void of group homes, concluding the trend in property values and the number of property transactions were comparable.

"Regardless of age of neighborhood, relationship to downtown, number of residents in the facility," and the type of resident (which included the mentally retarded, juvenile and adult offenders, psychiatric patients and alcoholics) strong evidence was found "to contest the commonly held assumption that declining neighborhood property values would be the consequence... (of) residential facilities," the report says.

Although all real estate professionals questioned say group homes tend to depreciate nearby property values, two of the appraisers say the homes adversely affect areas usually only immediately before and after the home is set up — when emotional fervor is at a pitch. As the neighborhood adjusts, they say,