

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,

property values stabilize.

Arthur Traut, an Island appraiser for 14 years, says the effect depends heavily on the way the home is managed.

"I don't think over a long haul a group home will have an adverse effect if it is well managed and supervised," he says, adding: "A group home certainly has some effect on the saleability of a home but usually only about 60 days after the group home is put in the neighborhood."

Any change in property values is usually the result of plenty of emotion and few facts, Traut says.

Barbara Blum, director of the Metropolitan Placement Unit, formed specially to place Willowbrook's outgoing population, agrees.

"It's a matter of education: The public's personal perceptions of the retarded must be changed," she says. Too often communities anticipate a slew of dire consequences with the coming of group homes, including rising crime rates, vandalism and noise, hence the conclusion property values will diminish, she adds.

The solution: "Tell the community everything. The most important thing is that people must accept and understand what is being presented. When they know the facts, they can objectively evaluate," Traut says.

Joseph Walsh, a veteran appraiser, agrees that much depends on how well the facility is controlled and operated. Additionally, he says, echoing the thoughts of many residents of the North Shore, where there are now 23 group homes, "it's possible to overdo this business."

"The homes should be put up in great moderation. There should be definite limits for any community," Walsh says. (No such limits exist now, although sponsoring agencies tend to seek community board approval for group homes,

giving the community some control over how many homes it feels it can absorb.)

In an effort to determine community feelings on existing group homes on Staten Island, of which there are 34 for socially-troubled youths and one for mentally retarded youngsters, the Advance questioned residents next door or across the street from four facilities.

In three out of four neighborhoods, residents said the homes were well supervised and managed and in no way disrupted the neighborhood. Additionally, they did not feel the home would be a consideration to prospective buyers, should they wish to sell their homes.

In a fourth neighborhood, surrounding a Castleon Corners group home for delinquent girls, the residents' reactions were mixed. Two residents objected to the profusion of cars on the block and occasional loud noise from the home, while a third homeowner said the facility had no effect on the area.

A more-extensive study was performed in the area around a halfway house for ex-convicts in Green Bay, Wis., where 61.9 per cent of all residents questioned approved of the home. A second study there found that turnover rates in a three-block radius of a group home decreased after home residents moved in.

Additional research on group home impact was done by a Princeton University graduate student who studied the selling trends around 17 residential facilities in White Plains, N.Y., including homes for mentally retarded and socially-maladjusted children and hospitals and nursing homes.

In two of four areas studied, with a total of seven residential facilities, property values increased at the same rate of two control areas. Home values jumped from roughly \$25,000 to \$40,000 from 1965 to 1975, the study says.

In two other neighborhoods, hosting 10 facilities, results were inconclusive, in one instance, because too few sales occurred and in another because property values increased so dramatically that the effect of residential facilities was overshadowed by other factors.

Although group home proposals seldom become reality without a fight from the community, leaders of the opposition rarely question the concept of life in a small family-like setting versus a large institution as a means of therapy for delinquent and mentally retarded children and the like.

"Everybody says it's a good idea, but not in my neighborhood," says an attorney involved in the struggle to deinstitutionalize Willowbrook's population of 5,000.

"Where are we going to put them, on Mars?" he asks.

Mrs. Blum, the MPU director and former head of the city office of the state Board of Social Welfare, is similarly frustrated in her attempts to deal with unwieldy communities.

"I have observed mentally retarded children in big settings that I had to administer and didn't like doing it, and I've seen the changes in human life in small settings. That's the point to keep in mind," she says.

Rita Charron, director of the Lansing (Mich.) Programs for the Retarded, says the struggle between community and group home sponsors will be resolved by cooperation on both sides.

"We know that property values don't go down with group homes. We know that evaluations have come out very positive for existing group homes. If you set up a few good examples of well-managed homes, the rest of it is easy. You just have to promise to do your job," she says.