

# Residents express fears about center for retarded in Port Richmond

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA

Port Richmond residents recited a familiar litany of fears last night—fear of increased crime, fear for the safety of their children and fear for their struggling business community—at a meeting on the proposed takeover of the former Garber Brothers store by a Willowbrook Development Center program.

If the proposal receives inter-agency approval, the training former Willowbrook residents already expatriated into the community need—in matters such as handling money and using public transportation—would be offered in the large two-story building at 281 Richmond Ave.

The program would also be offered as a "halfway" measure to residents of Willowbrook preparing to leave the center for community residency.

According to Fran Ryan, deputy director of treatment services, "nothing has been signed" by Willowbrook or the Garber

family, which owns the building.

Paul Garber, who attended the meeting, did not comment on the terms of the proposal. He did say, however, that preliminary discussions with Willowbrook officials took place two years ago, when the store was first vacated.

The Island's Mental Retardation Council will approve or disapprove the proposal at a meeting Friday, Mrs. Ryan said. The proposal is also "on the desk" of Barbara Blum, director of the metropolitan placement unit, the office mandated to carry out the depopulation of Willowbrook by 1981.

If approved, the proposal would go to Community Board 1, which sponsored last night's meeting in Faith United Methodist Church under the auspices of the Port Richmond area committee.

A large portion of the session dealt with the details of the proposed program. "Several hundred" former and present Willowbrook residents would use the facility on a vari-

able basis, depending on their needs and would be serviced by a staff of 50 or 60, Mrs. Ryan said.

Several times, in response to repeated questions, she explained that the persons who would use the facility are not from other boroughs or parts of the state. The Island is their "borough of origin," which is to say, they were born here or their families lived here before they entered Willowbrook or their families live here now.

"They have a right to live in the community," Mrs. Ryan said.

One other site is being considered, she said. The Port Richmond site has "unique" advantages of accessibility and space, she added. And the Board 1 area has, so far, absorbed the lion's share of former Willowbrook residents. "It seemed logical to look for a site in the Board 1 area, for that reason," Mrs. Ryan said. She estimated that half of the Willowbrook patients placed on the Island live in the North Shore district, a phenomenon she ascribed to "people's willingness to accept

these individuals into their homes."

Lorraine Stubits, a homeowner in the area, said that persons in the program, most of whom would use public transportation, would be seen as easy targets by purse-snatchers and muggers and would cause an increase in crime and a decrease in the neighborhood's livability.

Mrs. Ryan answered, "The persons in the program will be supervised. The state is responsible for them and we must do our best to guarantee their safety."

She also said she did not foresee the facility as a threat to the business district, but as a possible asset, since employees and persons using the facility would be shopping in area stores, eating in local restaurants.

What finally surfaced, however, was the fear of retarded individuals themselves.

"What about what happened at Silver Lake?" a woman asked. "This is what we're afraid of. Many of us are parents,

with young children. How do we know that won't happen here."

Last spring, a Willowbrook outpatient allegedly raped a seven-year-old Silver Lake girl.

Mrs. Ryan thanked the woman, saying, "I appreciate your candor," but declined to comment on the matter since the case is currently under adjudication.

"I don't mind these people being helped, but not at the expense of my child," the woman stated.