

# Former Garber's site again considered by Willowbrook

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA

In what may prove to be a startling reversal, the Willowbrook Developmental Center's proposal for the vacant Garber Brothers store in Port Richmond, a proposal that spawned strong community opposition and was believed dead, was revived last night during a meeting of the Port Richmond Community Council.

A Staten Island businessman who asked not to be identified is negotiating with the Garber family to buy the store and will lease it to the developmental center for use as a training and counseling center provided the plan meets community approval.

Reportedly, this reintroduction of the proposal has already garnered some favor, in particular, at a meeting of the Port Richmond area committee of Com-

munity Board 1 last Monday. According to Kathy Sollecito, president of the council, a "contingent of residents" spoke in favor of the plan that night.

Willowbrook, which was dissuaded from the Garber Brothers proposal late last year, originally intended to set up a large center in the vacant store to serve perhaps 400 de-institutionalized Willowbrook residents and the indigent retarded. Willowbrook eventually accepted Community Board 1's recommendation to break the program into parts and had recently begun negotiations with the owners of the vacant Pantry Pride store, Port Richmond, as a site for a portion of the training and counseling program.

All along, however, Willowbrook officials maintained that the Garber Bros. store would suit their needs best. Nevertheless, Elin Howe, Willowbrook's

director, said during a December community board meeting that she would not bring a program into a resistant community.

Apparently, a few Port Richmond residents are beginning to think that an occupied Garber Bros. store is better than an empty target for vandals.

The businessman who is negotiating to buy the store is a Port Richmond resident. He stated that the influx of Willowbrook staff and clients would be helpful to the area.

James Callaghan, a 15-year Port Richmond resident, characterized his community's original opposition to the proposal as "totally irrational and hysterical." He claimed, as did several others at the meeting in the Camelot Drug Prevention Center, Richmond

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Ave., that with Richmond Ave. in its present run-down shape, it was unlikely that a department store would find Garber's an attractive location.

"It certainly will not be the last nail in the coffin," he said of the plan, addressing himself to one of the opposition points raised three months ago.

Another council member, Ralph Santiago, maintained that both the staff and clients of the counseling-training center would do some shopping "and bring money into the area."

The Rev. Lowell Johnson, pastor of Faith United Methodist Church, Port Richmond, who has a retarded foster son, said the plan would not only benefit the area but aid the retarded.

Mary Kelly, a longtime resident and one of the original opponents of the

plan, said the issue need not be reopened since the community had already gone on record against it. She had 500 petitions by way of proof, she said.

Nevertheless, the council passed a resolution to request the Port Richmond Area Committee chairman, Diane Carducci, to reopen the matter and presumably bring it to the full board.

Fran Ryan, director of Willowbrook's treatment services, who made one of the original presentations on the proposal was invited to last night's meeting but did not attend. It was alleged that she had been dissuaded from attending by Community Board 1's district service manager, Norman Berger.

Berger said he had spoken with Miss Ryan but had merely reiterated the board's official stance on the matter—in favor of dividing the program and using Pantry Pride and opposed to the Garber Bros. site.

Specifically, the board opposed the Garber Bros. site on the basis that the area was already "saturated" with social services, that the program might by its very size defeat the intent of de-institutionalization. Additionally, there was the strong community feeling against the plan, well documented in a series of meetings and hearings.

Among Port Richmond residents, op-

position tended to center on fear of the retarded —on at least one occasion, the case last year of the rape of a 7-year-old Silver Lake girl, allegedly by a former Willowbrook resident was brought up, along with fears about the safety of the retarded themselves and the effect on neighborhood businesses.

The fact that a second party could be purchasing Garber's before leasing it to Willowbrook lends credence to reports that the Garber family eventually became disinterested in leasing to Willowbrook and hoped, instead, to sell the store.

In business conducted before discussion of the Garber proposal, the council discussed a pool hall and pinball arcade at 260 Richmond Ave. The operator, a Brooklynite, does not have an arcade license and has been served with, in the past month, about \$2,000 in summonses. Police Officer Peter Lembo estimated.

Area residents and merchants claim that youngsters frequent the area late at night, but that it cannot be closed since it enjoys status as a social club.

The pool hall has been shut down for the past few days. Reportedly the proprietor plans to reopen it as a social club for adults. The council plans to see the owner of the building before taking further steps.

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