

Willowbrook-Garber plan rejected

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA

Port Richmond residents last night turned down the newly revised Willowbrook Developmental Center-Garber Brothers store proposal to place a districtwide counseling and training center for ex-Willowbrook residents in the vacant Richmond Ave. store.

More than 200 neighborhood residents jammed the senior citizen center of the Catholic Youth Organization headquarters for the meeting called by Community Board 1's Port Richmond area committee.

John Michelotti, who was induced toward the end of the meeting to step forward as the "mystery" businessman interested in purchasing Garber's and then leasing it to Willowbrook, said,

however, that it looked to him as if the community was "split 50-50" on the Garber's plan.

The eight-year Port Richmond resident said he was only interested in Garber's if Willowbrook would lease the building and was not interested in purchasing the store for any other use.

Michelotti also reiterated a pledge made last week that he would not consider purchasing or leasing Garber's amid community opposition.

Some new opposition to the current proposal for serving Willowbrook residents—arrived at after Board 1 rejected the Garber's bid and induced Willowbrook to consider pruning the program—also surfaced last night.

John Poppe, president of the Decker Ave. Civic Association, which claims

the support of hundreds of families in the area, said his group was not given an opportunity to examine or comment on the proposed use of the vacant Pantry Pride store on Forest Ave. for the smaller portion of the program originally intended for Garber's.

Poppe claimed that the "no opposition" conclusion reached at an area committee meeting Jan. 23 did not reflect his group's sentiments and requested a hearing on the matter.

Several other speakers at the meeting, while not declaring themselves specifically in favor or opposed to the Pantry Pride site, said they feared for the retarded persons who would be pro-

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gram clients there.

Mrs. M. Ragucci, who lives on Catherine St., near the vacant store, said a nearby lot is a popular hangout for vandals. "I keep my own children away. What's going to happen if one of these other children (clients) gets jumped."

Elin Howe, Willowbrook's director, who has investigated perhaps a half-dozen sites in the Board 1 area for post-institutional service programs, observed drily; "So far I haven't come across one site that people believe would be safe for our residents."

She also said that no program site would be 100 percent popular or receive widespread community support.

The Pantry Pride store would house counseling services, Miss Howe said. A staff of 30 or 40 would serve a similar number of clients over a 10-hour day. The store space, of which only a portion would be used by Willowbrook, would be taken up mainly by offices, she added.

Although a safe majority of those at last night's meeting reiterated opposition to the Garber plan, there was some support for it, often based on the pre-

mise that a building in use, whatever the use, is to be preferred to a vacant target for vandals.

Charles Malloy, CYO director, said Willowbrook would be an asset to Richmond Ave. Michael Dempsey, director of the senior citizen center, attacked one of the original oppositions to the Garber plan—that the area, with nearly 10 social service programs is already saturated with them.

"What exactly is wrong with providing services to people who need them?" he asked.

The area committee met after the general session. It will recommend, at tonight's Board 1 meeting, to leave the board's endorsement of the Pantry Pride site intact.

The Decker Ave. Civic Association request for a hearing will be noted, as will the committee's conclusion that Port Richmond is opposed to Garber's as a program site, but "less opposed" to Pantry Pride.

Thomas LaManna, board chairman; Harold Greene, second vice chairman, and Diane Carducci, chairman of the area committee, represented the board at the meeting.