

# Plan for center for retarded in Board 2 area draws fire

By DIANE C. LORE

While stressing that they were not opposed to adequate care and community-based services for the mentally retarded, Dongan Hills residents last night voiced their disapproval of a proposal that would place a therapy, counseling and service center for the retarded in their community.

More than 30 persons jammed the small New Dorp office of Community Board 2 last night for a public hearing on a proposal by the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook to open a Borough Developmental Services Office (BDSO) for the care of the mentally retarded in the Board 2 area.

The site under consideration for the office is a 10-room, two-story brick building at 26 Dumont Ave., off Hylan

Blvd. and Old Town Rd., in Dongan Hills.

During the emotion-filled, three-hour hearing, the residents' main objection to the proposal emerged as what recourse homeowners would have if the office were opened in the neighborhood, but, for various reasons, failed to provide the proposed services.

"You're asking us to let you put this place in our neighborhood with no guarantee that it's going to work or that you'll do what you say you'll do. And if it doesn't work out, you've got a five-year lease and we're stuck," one homeowner noted.

Some resident said they would not mind the office opening if the community would be allowed to have some input into the facility through an advisory board or monitoring system.

Elin M. Howe, director of 1,600-bed

developmental center, said she would be "more than happy to have such a system" and invited community interest.

Felton King, president of the Willowbrook chapter, Civil Service Employees Association, representing workers at the institution, set the emotional tone of the hearing as the first to speak.

"No one has addressed themselves to the behavioral problems of retarded children," he asserted. "The state Department of Mental Hygiene has not identified what kind of retarded children will be placed in the community. It's very important to know the exact status of these people."

Jack Dietch, Board 2 member who chaired the hearing, told King he was making "general comments" on the state plan to release retarded persons

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from institutions into the community. "That is not our function here tonight," Dietch reminded residents, but rather whether or not to open the service office in the Dongan Hills location.

Louis Caravone, chairman of the Beachview Manor Civic Association, suggested the office be placed in the South Beach Psychiatric Center where United Cerebral Palsy Association of New York already provides services for 50 former Willowbrook patients.

"What's wrong with putting the office in the South Beach Psychiatric Center?" he asked. The Ocean Breeze facility, he claimed, is being under utilized.

"The place for mentally retarded children should be in a state institution, not in a community like ours," Caravone said, drawing a round of applause from residents.

The community, he explained, has heard many similar proposals for "office space" in the area that eventually grew into more complicated situations. He cited the original proposal for the use of the South Beach Psychiatric Center as an example.

Miss Howe reminded Caravone that the developmental center was mandated by the court to integrate the mentally retarded into the community and more than 85 retarded persons have already been discharged and are living in the Board 2 area.

"That's unconstitutional. No one got to vote on it," one resident was overheard to mutter.

Several parents of children enrolled in St. Dorothy's Academy on Hylan Blvd., two blocks from the proposed site, claimed the school has had several "incidents" with retarded persons wandering in the area.

"It's just too close to the school," one parent commented. Another parent wondered if the St. Dorothy students "should be exposed to 50 or 60" retarded people at one time.

One resident, who identified herself only as "Mrs. Piazza," brought her 48-year-old retarded son with her to the hearing. "You people should be ashamed of yourselves. You people are talking like they talked 48 years ago when my son was born," she said, placing her hand on her son's shoulder.

"We're not against the retarded," one

resident said, "but let's separate our emotions from the issue."

The proposed Dumont Ave. office would serve a maximum of 200 retarded clients, Miss Howe said, including the 85 retarded people already living in the Board 2 area with their parents or in foster homes. The remainder would be integrated into the community under the court-ordered phase-out of the developmental center. One half, or approximately 100 persons, would come to the office, arriving with escort, or on public transportation.

The remaining 100 clients the center would serve would be visited at home by a social worker.

The building would not be used as a group home, Miss Howe stressed, and no medication would be dispensed to clients.

Charles Korner, director of community services for the developmental center, said the center would seek a five-year lease on the Dumont Ave. building. The building would house office space, two activities rooms, a conference room and a waiting room. He noted that parking would be available in an adjacent lot.

The building would be open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and on two evenings during the week, he said. Staff members would include social workers, psychologists, case managers, therapists, clerical help and administrators. The building would house Miss Howe's office.

After the hearing was adjourned, the eight community board members who chaired the meeting met privately and drafted a proposal and recommendation on the site that will be presented before the full community board for a vote at the board's meeting Tuesday night.

However, Jack Dietch, vice chairman of Community Board 2, stressed the board could only act as an advisory body. Under the court phase-out plan, three borough service offices, one in each community board area, must be set up. If the office is not opened in Dongan Hills, another site within the board's jurisdiction must be chosen.

The Dongan Hills site, Dietch commented, poses no zoning violations requiring a variance permit. Technically, he confirmed, the developmental center would not need community board approval to open the office in Dongan Hills.

Community Board 1 on the North

Shore has already voted, after much community discussion, to locate a service center for the retarded in a former Pantry Pride supermarket on Forest Ave. in Port Richmond. That decision came after the board turned down state officials' favored site, which was the former Garber Brothers department store on Richmond Ave., also Port Richmond.

On the South Shore, Community Board 3 will vote on a proposal next month to place a service office in the Nelson Terrace catering hall in Great Kills.

Both offices would offer identical services in their respective board areas as the Dumont Ave. site.

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