Fire damages planned center for retarded

A suspicious fire damaged a Dongan Hills building last night that, over some community opposition, had been approved as a counseling service center for the retarded, to be run by Borough Developmental Services.

The blaze began at 26 Dumont Ave. at midnight, and caused medium damage to the back of the structure. Chief Michael Porzio of the 21st Battalion said he labeled the fire suspicious because the flames spread quickly through the building.

He said the fire appeared to have started near a staircase and then flashed upstairs. Although there was smoke and water damage inside, Porzio said there was little apparent structural damage.

The two-story brick building is owned by Joseph Perrotta of Midland Beach. The New York Foundling Hospital had been renting the structure at the time of the fire. The building was unoccupied when the fire began.

A spokesman for Borough Developmental Services was unavailable to comment how the fire would affect the agency's plans.

On April 19, Community Board 2 voted by a margin of 26 to 8 to approve use of the structure as a therapy and counseling service for the retarded. More than 600 people attended the meeting, and many Dongan Hills homeowners told the board that they feared property devaluation if the building became a counseling center.

The counseling center was to be opened from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and two evenings through the week. It was to serve no more than 200 persons, and was to have a staff of 35.

Spokesmen for the Borough Developmental Services said at the time that the Dumont Ave. address was chosen because the building needed few renovations to make it suitable as a counseling and therapy center.

At the April 19 meeting, some Dongan Hills residents asked if other sites were considered. A representative of the BDS said other buildings had been examined but would have required expensive alterations to make them suitable.

Engine companies 161, 160 and 159, and ladder companies 81, 77 and 61 responded to the blaze.