

Our opinion

Arson is no solution

Recent years have seen an alarming increase in the incidence of arson on Staten Island, a trend some believe to be unavoidable as the borough's population grows.

While it may be true that fires will continue to be set deliberately as long as profits may be reaped from property insurance policies or as long as there are individuals who suffer from pyromania, there seems to be a new sort of arsonist attempting to gain a foothold on the Island.

These sick individuals appear to believe that fire will somehow serve to eliminate their problems.

Thieves who steal automobiles for the purposes of joy-riding use fire to dispose of the cars and, they hope, to destroy evidence such as fingerprints. Their leavings, in the form of burned-out hulks, can be seen in increasing number around the Island.

Burglars who break into homes or businesses have taken to setting fires in the hope of covering up the original crime. More than a few established businesses have fallen vic-

tim to these arsonists, and such fires have occurred in many Island communities.

Just this week, according to Fire Department officials, someone used fire in what might have been an effort to prevent a community-based counseling, therapy and recreation center for mentally retarded individuals from opening in Dongan Hills.

Community Board 2 last month approved the use of a two-story building on Dumont Ave. by the state agency planning to operate the center. Late Sunday night, a portion of the building was damaged by a fire that officials say was fueled by a flammable liquid.

Because plans to open the center ran into some opposition, fire marshals are investigating the blaze on the assumption it might have been set by a person or persons wishing to keep the facility out of Dongan Hills.

Now that fire officials have raised that possibility, they should move

swiftly to complete their probe lest an entire community be held under a cloud of suspicion. But we hope the investigation will result in the arrest of the arsonist responsible for the fire, and in the prosecution of that individual to the fullest extent of the law.

As a growing borough, the Island already has enough problems without arson being added to the list. And though fires motivated by financial gain or sheer thrill may never be eliminated, the use of fire in place of due process — to determine where particular facilities ought to be sited — cannot be tolerated in a civilized society.

The Fire Department has promised a stepped-up campaign against arson on the Island, and we hope to see fire marshals working closely with police to crack down on those who view fire as a solution to their problems.

Such demented individuals are a threat to our community, and they must be shown once and for all that fire is a solution to nothing.