

State to set up day center despite second arson try

By BRUCE ALPERT

State officials said yesterday that they will move ahead with plans to convert a Dongan Hills house into a day center for the retarded despite the second reported incident of arson at the two-story brick building in less than five months.

Elin M. Howe, director of the Staten Island Developmental Center and the Office of Borough Developmental Services, said that the state had signed a five-year lease with the owner of the building at 26 Dumont Ave. and planned to open the center for the area's 200 retarded citizens next month.

Ms. Howe said she did not know whether the scheduled opening will be pushed back as a result of two fires that broke out Sunday inside the brick building, causing what fire officials described as light damage.

"Obviously, we are upset by the fire, but we plan to move ahead with our plans," she said.

Meanwhile, a spokesman for the Fire Department said yesterday that fire marshals have begun an investigation into the blazes, which were discovered by firemen in a first-floor room and an office on the upper floor.

"The fire has been labeled suspicious because it broke out in two separate places," said spokesman John Markey. "And we plan to conduct a full investigation."

A three-month probe by detectives from the New York City Police Department and fire marshals following a suspicious blaze on May 1 at the building failed to turn up any suspects. That blaze caused medium damage, according to fire officials.

The May 1 fire occurred only two weeks after Community Board 2 had approved the house for use as a

center for the retarded over community opposition.

Shortly after that blaze, Deputy Chief Fire Marshal John Barracato said that investigators had obtained "hearsay" information that the fire may have been started by an area resident or residents opposed to the planned use of the building.

Cora Hoffman, a spokesman for state Mental Retardation Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin, said yesterday that she was confident that the latest fires do "not represent the feelings of the vast majority of Staten Island residents who have shown their compassion and understanding for the mentally retarded."

She said that a lease was signed last month with owner Joseph Perrotta calling for the state to move into the building around Oct. 15.

Under the terms of the lease, the state agreed to pay Perrotta \$37,000 for renovations at the house as well as \$34,800 per year in rent for the 5,800-square-foot building.

Ms. Howe said the state plans to provide counseling, therapy and recreation programs for the 200 retarded citizens living in the Community Board 2 area.

Negotiations are continuing to lease a portion of the Nelson Terrace in Great Kills and the former Pantry Pride supermarket on Forest Ave. in Port Richmond for use as similar centers for retarded residents living in areas covered by Community Boards 3 and 1, she said.

The Dumont Ave. building has been unoccupied for the past several months. It had been used for the past 10 years as offices for the New York Foundling Hospital and, before that, as a private residence.