

2 teens charged with torching center

Probers praise neighbors' aid, say they can't figure a motive

By BRUCE ALPERT

Two 17-year-old youths from Dongan Hills were arrested early today and accused of tossing homemade bombs Sunday into a neighborhood building planned as a day center for the retarded. Molotov cocktails, police said, fueled a fire that seriously damaged the two-story brick house.

Michael O'Hara of 247 Reid Ave. and Joseph Koeller of 1448 Hylan Blvd., both of whom live with their parents within two blocks of the fire-scarred building at 26 Dumont Ave., were expected to be arraigned later today on charges of arson, possession of dangerous weapons and criminal mischief, police said.

According to police, the youths tossed the molotov cocktails — bottles contain-

ing a flammable liquid — through windows of the building.

The Sunday torching of the Dumont Ave. house delayed state plans for a November opening of the center for the area's 200 retarded citizens. It was the third suspicious fire in the structure in less than six months.

Neighborhood residents and witnesses to the latest arson apparently led police to O'Hara and Koeller. Lt. Hugh Bennett, commanding officer of the Island's Crimes Against Property Squad, attributed a quick break in the case to "cooperative community residents."

"We canvassed the community and were able to talk to some witnesses who were helpful," Bennett said, adding that a joint police-fire marshal investigation

is continuing.

Bennett said that police have not determined a motive for the arson or whether O'Hara or Koeller might have been involved in the two previous suspicious fires at the building — the first on May 1, the second on Sept. 24.

O'Hara, a messenger in Manhattan, and Koeller, who is unemployed, were picked up in their homes, and after questioning by representatives of the district attorney's office and police, were booked about 1:30 a.m. in the 120th Precinct stationhouse, St. George.

Fire marshals, who canvassed Dongan Hills yesterday in the joint effort with police, said three or four separate fires had been set Sunday about 9:30

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