

New Dorp residents say safer site needed for retarded center

By DIANE C. LORE

New Dorp residents said last night they would welcome a proposed training center for the retarded in their neighborhood, but they added they are opposed to locating the center on busy New Dorp Lane.

A Very Special Place, a private, non-profit organization, is seeking to open a day and evening training center for mentally retarded and physically handicapped adults in the former RAP Center building on New Dorp Lane.

More than 150 people jammed the board room at Sea View Hospital and Home last night for a public hearing on the proposal conducted by a committee of Community Board 2. The board will decide whether to recommend the center be opened on New Dorp Lane at its next meeting, Dec. 19.

Most New Dorp residents who addressed board members last night cited traffic congestion and parking problems on New Dorp Lane, questioning if they would pose a threat to clients who would use the center, should it be opened in

the RAP center building.

James Dooley, representing the New Dorp Central Civic Association, said homeowners have no objection to the proposal. "We have accepted the idea of having it in our community. We have agreed to take this program in," he said.

But Dooley noted that the RAP center building is located near an intersection and two parking lots used by bank customers.

The proposal calls for two vans to transport clients to and from the center.

Should the vans pull up in front of the RAP center, Dooley said the vans would discharge clients "into the middle of this traffic." "This is not a safe place," he added.

Howard Safar, community board member and director of the Staten Island Mental Health Society, asked Dooley if the civic association considered commercial vans and trucks making deliveries to stores on New Dorp Lane a traffic hazard. "If someone wanted to pull up a van and, say, unload carpet for

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a store, would they get treated the same way, in terms of traffic?" Several residents protested, calling the comparison unfair.

Dooley's comments were echoed by Andrew Luzzi, executive vice president of civic association, who showed a short film made by the association and showing traffic around the RAP center building.

The 122nd Precinct Community Council in New Dorp also opposed the RAP center site. "This particular site is not appropriate. They do need a safer site," Angela Drosdorf, representing the council, said.

Several speakers suggested alternate sites in the neighborhood be looked at, including the recently vacated Pantry Pride supermarket on Hylan Blvd. and the vacant E.J. Frock Co. building on New Dorp Plaza.

Genevieve Benoit, president of A Very Special Place, said both sites were inappropriate. The E.J. Frock building, she said, is too small to house the program. "From what I could see, it's much too little space," she said.

The Pantry Pride building, she said, would require extensive renovation, although it contains the 10,000 square feet of floor space she said is needed to house the program comfortably. "This site would require the construction and renovation of the building, which would mean more of your tax dollars spent," she said.

Other New Dorp residents who spoke against using the RAP center building questioned if the building was accessible for people in wheelchairs; if it had adequate fire protection, including fire escapes, and if the building contained adequate space to store refuse.

Miss Benoit said the building already had been inspected by the state. "No one is more concerned about our clients than us, who will be providing the services," she said.

She claimed she had asked the civic association four months ago for time to speak at its meeting and outline the program, but was never acknowledged. "It's becoming a never ending process of meeting your stipulations," she said,

referring to the civic association.

Ben Pulice, chairman of the community board's traffic and transportation committee, said he had inspected the site and agreed there was traffic congestion. He noted however, "No matter who the RAP center building is rented out to, the same traffic problem will exist.

"Ralph Catania, the owner of this building," Pulice added, "has every right to rent this building to whomever he pleases."

"There are an awful lot of people here who are not listening to one another," injected Sister Virginia Lee, a teacher at St. Sylvester's School, Concord. "Everybody is trying to get their own selfish point made," she added.

The hearing was chaired by Michael Primiano, who heads the community board's New Dorp area subcommittee. Primiano is also president of the New Dorp Central Civic Association. He will vote on the RAP center site at the community board meeting.

At last month's board meeting, two members questioned the ethics of Primiano acting in the dual capacity.

"I'm wearing two hats, and it's difficult," he acknowledged last night. As Primiano spoke against the RAP center site, he turned the hearing over to Jack Deitch, another board member.

A Very Special Place hopes to serve 80 mentally retarded and physically handicapped adults at the center, according to its proposal. Half will come from the South Shore, and the remainder will come from the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook.

Thirty clients would be served during the day programs, while 50 would be served during evenings and weekends.

Services provided during the daytime hours would include occupational and speech therapy, mobility training and living skills. Evening and weekend sessions would include arts and crafts sessions and various family activities where families of clients could participate in programs on a membership basis.

The ratio of staff to clients would be approximately 4-1. The center would be funded entirely by the state Developmental Disabilities.