

Plans for state home on Emerson Hill triggers concern for clients, values

By DIANE C. LORE

A plan to open a respite-care home for the mentally retarded drew a mixed reaction last night as state officials unveiled the proposal to members of Community Board 2 and a handful of community residents.

The proposed location of the home is a state-owned house at 8 Diana Trail, Emerson Hill, one of Staten Island's most exclusive neighborhoods.

Elin M. Howe, director of the Borough Developmental Services Office, which would staff the home, called respite care "one of the crying needs" of Staten Island families with retarded adults or children living at home.

Some neighborhood residents, however, who attended the community board subcommittee meeting in the board's New Dorp office, expressed concern that the Emerson Hill site might pose a danger to clients. One resident expressed concern that property values in the area might be devalued.

Under the program, Miss Howe explained, families could bring a retarded adult or child to stay at the home for a period of up to 30 days. The house on Diana Trail, she said, could accommodate three persons on a daily basis, plus staff members.

"I couldn't say how many days a year the house would be occupied," she said. "It would only be open when it's needed for respite care," she added. Peak periods when parents might need a "respite" from a retarded child include summer months and the holiday season, she speculated.

The home, she said, would be open to mentally retarded people of all ages, but clients would be screened on a case basis. The home would only serve Staten Island clients, she added.

The state would pick up the tab for clients; there would be no cost to families. BDSO staff, Miss Howe said, would be supplied with a vehicle to move residents in and out of the house and would take care of cooking and housework. "The house will never be left unattended or unsupervised," she promised.

Clients, she said, would not be in the house all day. Most would go to Board of Education programs, sheltered workshops or jobs during the day and would return to the house at night and during weekends, she added.

But the question on the minds of most board members and community residents during the meeting was why the Emerson Hill site?

Miss Howe pinpointed three advantages. "The house is sized nicely; it's owned by the state and is in relatively good shape and wouldn't require many repairs."

The two-story, three-bedroom home is in the center of the neighborhood of winding, steep hills. Some board members questioned whether the house would be accessible during winter months.

"What about the winter?" asked board member Christina Joseph. "I've been up there and it's definitely a bad site during the winter."

"Our people were up there and had no problem," Miss Howe replied.

One homeowner, who declined to identify himself, noted the area is bordered on either side by steep retaining walls. "If anyone in that house walks 20 feet in the wrong direction, they can fall off a retaining wall down the hill," he said.

Miss Howe said the state "could not

guarantee" there would be no accidents on any site chosen for the facility.

Ralph Avella of Emerson Hill, whose wife is a member of the community board, asked if the state had placed an estimated value on the house, and if it could be sold.

"You could have a house worth, say, \$200,000, and you've made no study?" "You can virtually buy any one family dwelling" for the home, he continued.

Miss Howe said the house was never appraised. "But the issue to sell the house is not up to me," she added. The state Office of General Services is responsible for selling state-owned property, she said, and the office must first offer the property for use by other government agencies.

But the primary reason the BDSO selected the location is because the property is state-owned. "What we're really talking about, in terms of our needs," said Miss Howe, "is a house that won't cost us anything."

Miss Howe reminded board members they could only act in an advisory capacity.

"We're not really here to ask for your approval. I'm here to inform you of a program we're going to start," she said.

She added, however, that she would be willing to work with board members should they propose alternate sites. The full board is expected to vote on a recommendation for the site at its February or March meeting.