

600 blast 5 proposed group homes at public hearing

By DIANE C. LORE

More than 600 Staten Islanders, ignoring driving rain and highway flooding, turned out last night at a Community Board 2 public hearing to voice their opposition to five sites proposed by the state for use as group homes for the mentally retarded.

More than 60 persons, who spoke emotionally against the sites, were greeted with cheers and applause during the four-hour session in the auditorium of Sea View Hospital and Home. None of the residents spoke in favor of the sites.

The five sites — two in Grasmere and one each in New Springville, Graniteville and Dongan Hills — were rejected by community residents because they were either located on busy streets, or too near schools, hospitals and other community-based facilities, and because the buildings themselves were said to be unsafe to house the retarded.

As alternative sites, some speakers proposed opening the group homes on the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook, or accommodating them in city-owned public housing projects or other apartment buildings.

A two-family brick house at 630 Hylan Blvd., Grasmere, is proposed for use as a group home to be operated by the Federation Employment and Guidance Service of Manhattan.

John Wilkenson, a Grasmere resident, said the site was located near three

schools — PS 30 on McFarland Ave., South Beach, and St. Joseph Hill Academy and St. John Villa Academy, and was also located near the Hills of Grasmere condominium townhouse complex. "Besides that," he added, "it's also near two ponds (Brady's Pond and Cameron Pond in Grasmere) and God forbid some kid should fall in and drown."

A handful of Grasmere residents also spoke out against a proposed site at 1082 West Fingerboard Rd., Grasmere. The wood-frame house was proposed as a home to be run by the Staten Island Aid for Retarded Children.

Residents said the wood-frame structure would pose a fire hazard to retarded clients. The house would also pose a

site. Middle class homeowners are being asked to shoulder the state's guilt for the failure of Willowbrook, Mrs. Dennan added, as the audience clapped and cheered loudly.

"My tenants have already told me they're going to move out if this group home gets in here," said another Fingerboard Rd. resident. "If my tenants move, I'll lose the income. I'll be forced to move out of my home."

"I feel for the mentally retarded, but I feel more for my neighbors who have worked their whole lives to own a home," added Mary Anderson, of Grasmere, who opposed the Fingerboard Rd. site.

Dongan Hills residents expressed sim-

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sanitary threat to clients because it is not linked to a sewer system, they charged. The house, they added is also located on a 40-by-80-foot lot, and would leave no yard space for retarded clients to use.

"There are no sewers, only a septic tank to service the property, and septic tanks can overflow," said Joseph Dennon, a homeowner on Fingerboard Rd.

"Placing group homes in an established, residential neighborhood can only be blockbusting," he said, and his wife, who spoke out later against the

ilar fears about a proposed two-family brick home at 158 Cromwell Ave. The group home proposed for that site would be run by the Association for the Advancement of the Blind and Retarded, a Queens-based organization.

Homeowners said the building contains plumbing and heating violations and lacks yard space. They said the site was too near the Staten Island Rapid Transit tracks and near two schools — PS 11 on Jefferson St. and St. Ann's School. They cited heavy traffic flow along Cromwell Ave., from cars using

Richmond Rd. and Hylan Blvd.

William Counihan, vice president of the Dongan Hills United Civic Association, which objected to the site, suggested the five group homes be clustered in one area. "Call it 'Common Sense Village' and put the homes in one area, with their own yard, and their own garden."

Pat Gentile, president of the Staten Island Concerned Citizens Committee, said the Cromwell Ave. site was not appropriate because it is "near too many children."

"Why can't apartments be used for the retarded?" he suggested. "The state can take over a whole floor." He cited the success of the Arlington Terrace group home in Mariners Harbor. "That's functioning well because it's in an apartment house."

"Some of the mothers don't want their retarded children living at home with them, but why do we have to pay for that?" asked one Dongan Hills homeowner. "Put the group homes on the Willowbrook property where you have a whole 364 acres to build on," she suggested.

The Catholic Guardian Society of New York has offered to run a group home proposed for a two-family wood-frame house at 1582 Richmond Ave., Graniteville. Graniteville residents opposed to the site said the house also is not served by sanitary sewers, and the wood-frame structure would pose a fire hazard.

Charles Notafrafrancisco, a Richmond

Ave. resident, objected to the site because of traffic along Richmond Ave., and the lack of sewers.

"The community is obviously very opposed to the site, and that in itself raises questions about the safety of the potential clients," one Graniteville resident told community board members.

"Can you guarantee that my children will not be harmed by these people?" a Graniteville resident asked board members. "They may be very harmless people, but what if the neighborhood kids harass them and get them riled up?"

A fifth site in the Community Board 2 area proposed for a group home, is a two-family house at 42 Gadsen Pl., in the Heartland Village development in New Springville. The Manhattan-based Association for Children with Retarded Mental Development has offered to run the home.

John Guttman, president of the Heartland Village Civic Association, which objected to the site, asked the board about safety precautions and staffing. "These are all severely and profoundly retarded people. God forbid something happens to them. They could wander around and fall into someone's swimming pool and drown, God forbid."

Guttman suggested the state "buy a piece of land and build its own homes to its own specifications."

Max Levy, a Heartland Village resident, said the Gadsen Pl. site was in an area "where there are a lot of teenagers." "People will attack them, resent them and abuse them," he said. "There's plenty of land right here at Sea

View," he added, suggesting the state locate the homes there.

"We don't want to be rabble-rousers, and we don't want to use scare tactics, but you'd better come up with a better solution and some answers to our questions," Betty Cardella, a New Springville resident, told the board.

All of the sites discussed last night would house at least six severely and profoundly retarded adults, according to a state proposal. State plans call for each home to be supervised on a 24-hour basis, with residents attending sheltered workshops or special education classes for at least six hours a day. A neighborhood advisory committee will be set up to monitor each home.

The group homes are a result of a 1975 court order, the Willowbrook Consent Decree, which calls for residents of the Staten Island Developmental Center to be shifted into community-based facilities. Each group home must house former residents of the developmental center as well as mentally retarded residents already living in the community.

Selection of group home sites must be made in accordance with guidelines established by the state legislature. The guidelines state that community boards must participate in the site-selection process.

According to Joseph Manifold, Chairman of Community Board 2, board members can either approve the list of five sites or propose alternate sites within the board area. Alternate sites suggested by the community board must be approved by the Staten Island Developmental Center and the state.

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