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'If we fail to choose sites, the state will'

Community Board 2 faces showdown on group homes

By DIANE C. LORE

Community Board 2 faces a showdown of sorts with community residents tonight.

If the board fails tonight to select group home sites for the mentally retarded, the state can and will select them without community input, warned board chairman Joseph Manifold.

It's expected tonight, during the board's monthly meeting at Sea View Hospital, that the board's committee on group homes will recommend the full board approve three sites for the homes — 630 Hylan Blvd., Grasmere; 42 Gadsen Pl., New Springville, and 1582 Richmond Ave., Graniteville — out of five sites originally proposed.

The committee, during a meeting last month, rejected another proposed site, at 158 Cromwell Ave., Dongan Hills. Committee chairman Patricia Whitehouse said the Cromwell Ave. site had "a lot of structural problems." The board is expected to pick an alternate site to-

night.

A fifth site, at 1082 Fingerboard Rd., Grasmere, and an alternate site on Kermit Ave., Grasmere, have been withdrawn from consideration by the owners, who reportedly had received threats. Neither owner could be reached for comment.

The placement of community homes for the mentally retarded is an emotional, hotly contested issue with homeowners.

A public hearing on group home sites in the Board 2 area was attended by 600 people last month. More than 60 persons, who spoke emotionally against the five proposed sites, were greeted with cheers and applause during the four-hour session in the auditorium of Sea View Hospital and Home.

Homeowners said the sites were either located on busy streets, or too near schools, hospitals and other community-based facilities. Some homeowners feared their property values would decline if a

group home were opened near their homes. Others feared the retarded clients' might be teased and harassed by neighborhood youths, or the retarded might harm their children.

Spokesmen from the Staten Island Developmental Center who attended the hearing attempted to answer questions from residents and allay their fears, but homeowners apparently found the answers unacceptable.

After the hearing, Michael Cantatore, director of Sea View, complained the auditorium had been left in a state of disarray. "The place was a mess. They were putting out cigarette butts on the floor and the walls. We found footprints on the walls. In addition, somebody ruined the sound system. A few of the microphones were just ripped from the wires. They were just cut off. There were a lot of intense feelings there that night," he said.

Since the public hearing, several

civic groups have discussed the group home sites at their meetings. Some civic groups have organized petitions and letter-writing campaigns to elected officials, protesting the group home sites.

Several alternatives have also been endorsed by civic groups. One alternative, called the "village concept," suggests the five group homes be clustered in one area, possibly on the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center, or on other state-owned land. Another alternative suggests using apartments, with possibly a whole floor given over to clients.

The group homes are the 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 as the prime method of emptying institutions for the retarded.

State officials say that when placed in a community setting, many retarded residents have

shown great improvement. They have learned basic living skills, how to socialize and hold down jobs in sheltered workshops, or attend training programs, and how to function away from parents and an institutional setting.

State plans call for each community board area in the city to have several group homes. All of the sites discussed for the Board 2 area will house at least six profoundly retarded adults, half of whom will come from the board area, according to a state proposal.

Although the sites will be selected by the state, the homes will be run by voluntary, non-profit agencies. Each home will 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.

Selection of group home sites must be made in accordance with guidelines established by the state.

legislature. The guidelines give community boards a 40-day timetable in which to work with state officials to select sites. The community board can either approve sites submitted by the state, or propose alternate sites, which the state must approve. This must be done within the 40-day time period. If the time period elapses, the state may choose the sites.

According to Manifold, if a motion is made tonight to postpone a vote on the sites, the board would exceed its 40-day time limit to act on the sites.

Homeowners and representatives from several civic groups are expected to attend the open meeting tonight. Manifold, however, stressed the meeting is not a public hearing, and only board members will be allowed to speak. Other items, he said, will also be considered on the board's agenda tonight. "We have a long agenda, and we would hope people would be courteous enough to let us get through it."