

'Oversaturated' Board 2 rejects group home sites

By DIANE C. LORE

Community Board 2 members last night overwhelmingly rejected all of the state's proposed group home sites for the mentally retarded in the board area, on the basis that the area already is "oversaturated" with community-based care facilities.

The board requested an immediate hearing before Thomas Coughlin, commissioner of the state Office for Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

The board's vote, during its monthly meeting at Sea View Hospital and Home, climaxed weeks of discussion and heated debate on the emotional issue of group homes.

A standing-room-only crowd of more

than 200 jammed the board room in the nurses residence of Sea View, and waited patiently for more than an hour while the board completed other items on its agenda and listened to City Comptroller Harrison Goldin speak.

City police and Sea View security guards patrolled the area near the board room. According to Lillian Prado, district service manager for the board, John Tillou and Scott Booth, representing the Staten Island Developmental Center, were forced to leave the meeting because they had received threats on their lives.

Except for shouts and a smattering of applause, the crowd remained orderly while the board debated the sites.

The sites rejected by the board last night are at 158 Cromwell Ave., Dongan

Hills; 630 Hylan Blvd., Grasmere, and 1582 Richmond Ave., New Springville. Two other sites originally proposed by the state — at 1082 Fingerboard Rd., Grasmere, and at 42 Gadsen Pl., New Springville, were withdrawn from consideration by the owners and did not require the board's vote.

The board debated the issue for more than an hour. At least 20 minutes were spent discussing parliamentary procedure. State Assemblymen Guy Molinari and Paul Viggiano addressed board members on the sites. Councilmen Nicholas LaPorte and Anthony Giacobbe, and Borough President Gaeta also had representatives at the meeting.

Molinari told the board he opposed the site at 158 Cromwell Ave. and suggested

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Community residents jam the nurses' residence at Sea View Hospital and Home during a group home hearing.

S.I. Advance Photo by Tony Carannante

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"perhaps the state is wrong" in attempting to place retarded residents in a community setting. Viggiano, who also submitted a letter to board members, said the site at 630 Hylan Blvd. "is not favored by the community".

Board member Joanne Avella of Emerson Hill presented the board with statistics on "oversaturation" in the board area.

Mrs. Avella presented board members with a detailed report on community facilities and services available in the board area. Community Board 2, she said, has the highest percentage of community-based care facilities and the highest percentage of retarded clients. "Legitimately," she said "we are oversaturated."

Mrs. Avella proposed the board request a hearing from Commissioner Coughlin. "Let us present our case for oversaturation to the commissioner. We have nothing to lose," she said as homeowners in the room applauded.

Patricia Whitehouse, chairman of the board's committee on group homes, said her committee had voted last month to recommend the full board approve three of the group home sites. Another site, she said, was rejected by the committee. She suggested the board vote on each site individually.

Board members then began a heated debate over whether to vote on each site or vote on Mrs. Avella's recommendation to request a hearing from the state.

"Let's get this board off the spot and put the decision in the hands of the judiciary," said board member Philip Scampas.

"I don't want to put it into the hands of the judiciary," said Jack Deitch, vice chairman of the board. "We're here to make decisions, so lets make decisions."

Some board members appeared confused over what they were being asked to vote on. "I don't know which way to vote," admitted board member Jean Visoky.

Homeowners stood around, amazed, as the board members debated. One man yelled: "Vote on it, already!"

Finally, each site was voted upon individually. The board voted 31-1, with two abstentions, to reject the site at 158 Cromwell Ave.; 23-5, with seven abstentions, to reject the site at 630 Hylan Blvd., and 23-5, with seven abstentions, to reject the site at 1582 Richmond Ave.

When the board rejected each site, they then considered Mrs. Avella's proposal and voted 24-5, with five abstentions, to request a state hearing.

Under a state law, known as the Padavan Legislation, which governs the selection of group home sites, Commissioner Coughlin has 15 days to set up a hearing on the group home sites in the Board 2 area.

Within 30 days after the hearing, Coughlin must announce a decision to the board, according to the Padavan law. Coughlin can uphold the sites originally chosen by the state or he can agree that the area is oversaturated.

If the community board does not agree with Coughlin's ruling, the board can fight the decision in the courts.

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, Willowbrook, to be shifted into

community-based facilities as the prime method for 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, attend training programs and function away from parents and an institutional setting.

State plans call for each community board in the city to have several group homes. All of the sites approved in 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.

At a public hearing last month on group home sites in the Board 2 area, more than 600 people cheered and applauded some 60 homeowners who spoke emotionally against the sites.

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 in their neighborhood. Others said they feared the retarded clients might be harassed by neighborhood youths or might harm their children.

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