

Voice in the community

Boards go their own way in solving problems

By DOUGLAS PATRICK

Community boards — which have become a power to be reckoned with since voters approved the revised City Charter in 1975 — are finding out that you can't please all the people all the time.

And even though the "people" are supposed to be their main concern, board members — like politicians — frequently find their power puts them between a rock and a hard place.

What should they do, for instance, when the rights of a minority are at odds with the will of the majority? Should they try to balance the needs of the minority with the will of the majority? Should they simply support the position of the majority? Or should individual conscience be the final arbiter?

These questions are not theoretical

and the answers aren't easy. Members of Community Board 2 and 3 recently found themselves facing a state ruling that required them to locate sites within their districts where group homes for the mentally retarded could be established. But the neighborhoods where these group homes were proposed expressed their clear and vehement opposition to the plan.

Community Board 3 conducted a public hearing on each of the potential group home sites and eventually approved a list of 13 sites. The New York State Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities will make the final decision on which sites will be selected, but only 80 persons will be placed in group homes within the board area, which generally encompasses the South Shore.

Community Board 2 handled the problem differently and announced — after conducting its own public hearings —

that its area was already "oversaturated" with community-based social service facilities, like the South Beach Psychiatric Center. The board decided to seek a moratorium on the construction of group homes within its mid-island district.

Last week, its plans were set back when Jennifer L. Howse, associate commissioner of the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, denied the request for a hearing on the issue.

Ms. Howse told board members they could seek a state hearing on the respective merits of each of the three proposed group homes within their district.

While it is impossible to second-guess the underlying motivation of the two boards' different decisions, it does point out another side of community boards — each has a different way of solving its problems.

Each of the city's community boards

is made up of a group of 50 people that represent different economic, social and ethnic backgrounds. The boards are as good or bad as people who make them up, observers say.

Although Joseph Margolis, executive vice president of the New York City Builders Association, thinks community boards do not promote the governmental efficiency its supporters would claim, he does agree that they "are no better or worse than the people who sit on them."

"From my subjective point of view, the test of their ability is demonstrated by their capacity to take the immediate heat of an unpopular decision that should be made," Margolis said.

He thinks that the Island's three boards are better educated than many others in the city and said a number of committee chairmen on the boards have

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demonstrated a good working knowledge of the problems developers face.

"Because of their years of experience with these sorts of problems, Community Boards 2 and 3 have shown a pretty good grasp of the technical steps of development," Margolis continued.

Community Board 1, which takes in the North Shore area, does not deal with many construction problems because most of the area is already developed. Board members are primarily concerned with the adequate delivery of social services.

While some critics say community boards are too absorbed with the problems of their own area and fail to approach problems from a Islandwide or citywide perspective, others say the boards should be parochial to a large extent.

Martin Gallent, vice chairman of the City Planning Commission, has said the



Thomas LaManna
Community Board 1



Joseph Manifold
Community Board 2



Richard McGivney
Community Board 3

boards are "best thing that ever happened to the city" because it gives community residents the ability to have their views heard.

If the community boards are too parochial on a particular issue, Gallent says, the City Planning Commission will overrule them.

Board members are under increasing pressure to keep themselves well-in-

formed on a wide variety of important and often controversial issues. They must also be prepared to receive nothing but criticism for performing a volunteer job.

This is the first in a four-part series on Staten Island's three community boards.

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