

## Editorial page

### Our opinion

# Community boards aren't walls

Created in 1961 but possessed of real influence only since adoption of a revised City Charter in 1975, the city's community boards have during their short lifetimes proved a valuable addition to municipal government and an important sounding board for citizen opinion.

In their early years the boards were cast in a limited advisory capacity, a source of comments and suggestions on development and planning issues within their boundaries. A decade ago, the panels were likened to "town forums," at which citizens might speak out on matters of immediate concern.

Only in recent years have the boards been given more substantive powers. They now vote on various development proposals and make recommendations to city planners and to the Board of Estimate, under the revised Charter, each board also has a full-time staff and responsibility for monitoring the delivery of municipal services within its territory.

Formal powers and duties aside,

it has been said that each community board is only as good as the individual citizens serving on it.

That certainly is true, and Staten Island is fortunate in that responsible, informed and unselfish individuals dominate its three community boards.

But the nature of some of the decisions boards recently have been asked to make has made clear the fact that some citizens confuse a board's narrow responsibility to the communities it serves and its larger responsibility to consider, on an intelligent and informed basis, the complex issues placed before it.

In proposals to establish drug treatment and counseling centers and neighborhood residences for the retarded, for instance, boards have had to balance the need for such services against the objections of many community residents to establishment of such facilities.

Striking a responsible balance has

not always been easy. Because of their continuing role as a sounding board for community opinion, the panels often must arrive at decisions after listening to emotional outbursts by opponents of various proposals.

All too often, the boards are damned by community residents for doing what reason and a careful evaluation of the facts suggest they must.

Community boards were not established to serve as walls, erected around neighborhoods to keep everyone else and everything else outside of the perimeter. Nor are the boards geared to respond to those who can shout the loudest; their task, rather, is to listen to all of the facts and to arrive at what a majority of board members feel to be a reasonable decision.

The job of community board member is not easy. Those who give their time and energy to serve on boards deserve applause. And they deserve some understanding, too.