

Voice in the community

Board 2: Caught in the middle and pressured by varied groups

By DIANE C. LORE

Community Board 2 is caught in the middle.

The board encompasses the mid-Island area — an area of generally stable, middle-class neighborhoods— and finds itself caught in the middle of trying to balance new construction and projects with the needed delivery of services to its expanding population.

Frequently the problems leave board members caught in the middle of their responsibilities. Should they "vote their conscience" on problems affecting the board area, or should their vote echo the will of the community they represent, especially when that community strongly opposes a project? Or is there a middle ground between choices?

Community Board 2 takes in the neighborhoods of Arrochar, Bloomfield, Bulls Head, Chelsea, Dongan Hills, Grant City, Grasmere, Lighthouse Hill, Egbertville, Emerson Hill, Midland Beach, New Dorp, New Springville, Oakwood, Ocean Breeze, Richmond, South Beach, Todt Hill, Travis and Willowbrook.

In those communities, board chairman Joseph Manifold noted, "we have

Community Board 2

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just about everything to deal with."

"We have acres of recreation and park areas, the Greenbelt, the wetlands to preserve, the problem of waste disposal and landfill, and the problem of energy needs, pollution and the power plant to contend with," Manifold said.

There are industrial and commercial areas and large health-care facilities including the South Beach Psychiatric Center, Sea View Hospital and Home, and the Staten Island Developmental Center, within the Board 2 area. And there are many flood-prone areas in need of sewers.

"Community Board 2 is caught between the problems of the South Shore and the North Shore," a Borough Hall official observed. "They feel they're being encroached upon by issues like the methadone clinic on the North Shore and the construction boom on the South Shore.

"Their first instinct may be to try to keep everything out — that's only natural to think of self preservation," the official observed. "But really," he added, "all the problems community boards face affect the whole Island. There is no running away."

Island representatives of city agencies, who work closely with the Island's three community boards, generally agree that Board 2 tends to be the board most heavily influenced by reactions of civic groups and area residents.

"Board 2 has several large, well-organized civic groups that know how to make the most of a good thing like a public hearing," commented a local city official, who declined to be identified. "These people may not necessarily be well-read or informed on a particular issue, but they definitely have very

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One of the Community Board 2 areas experiencing a construction boom between Hylan Blvd. and Capodanno Blvd. in Dongan Hills. This was once marshland.

S.I. Advance Photo by Frank J. Johns

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strong opinions they want to get across, and they won't give up," he added.

An example, he said, was the public hearing in May on proposed group home sites for the mentally retarded. Almost 600 people in the Board 2 area attended the four-hour hearing to voice opposition to the group home sites.

"There's no doubt, judging from the remarks some people made that night, that they hadn't done their homework on the issue. Nevertheless, they cared enough to speak out. Most of their remarks, while somewhat misguided, were still sincere and hard to ignore," the city official said.

After a lengthy debate and having weighed community opposition to the group home sites, the board voted last month to reject each site on the ground that the board area is already "oversaturated" with community-based health care facilities.

In other recent issues, the board voted down a proposal to place a methadone clinic in the South Beach Psychiatric Center, Ocean Breeze, and approved plans to open a training center on New Dorp Lane to serve mentally retarded and handicapped adults. Both issues brought a heavy response from civic groups and area residents.

Issues such as the methadone clinic and care of the mentally retarded raise questions about the board's effectiveness and responsibilities.



This sewer outfall under construction at the foot of Seaview Ave., Ocean Breeze, will connect with a massive network of new sewers in the Grasmere-Dongan Hills area. Flooding, a constant problem in the Board 2 area, should be eased.

S.I. Advance Photo by Irving Silverstein

The "major weakness" of Community Board 2 is "the inability of board members to recognize their role," said Jack Deitch, vice chairman of the board and chairman of its land use committee.

Some members, he said, "feel it's their obligation to represent their community's point of view" when they vote on difficult issues. But Deitch said the duty of board members should be "to vote their conscience."

Is community opinion, Deitch asked, only that of the most outspoken people?

"There are many people in the board area who don't have a voice or who are not able to exercise their right to speak," he said, citing the handicapped, the retarded, the elderly and the youth of the board area, and homeowners who are not represented by civic associations.

"We have a responsibility as board members to serve these minorities," Deitch added. "They deserve services and consideration just as much as the people who can yell the loudest."

"Sometimes it's hard" for every board member to think of the board as a whole area first, Manifold acknowledged. "When a person is appointed to the board (by the borough president or City Council members), it's usually because they have been very active in their community and they know the area and the people well."

"The people in Community Board 2," observed Michael Cantatore, director of Sea View Hospital and Home and a recent appointee to Board 2, "are fairly well-educated, very parochial on neighborhoods, and very protective of their homes, their family and their 'territory.' Because of this, any decision the board makes will always have a group that disagrees. But decisions have to be made; that's what we're here for."

Civic groups provide an important function for the community board by educating board members on their respective neighborhoods and bringing problems to the attention of the board, most members agree.

Some board members, however, say communication between civic groups and Board 2 leaves much to be desired.

"There is a breakdown of communications between Community Board 2 and its civic groups," said Bernard Kosinski, a recent appointee to the board who is also president of the Dongan Hills United Civic Association.

The board, he suggested, isn't popular with homeowners because homeowners believe the board is not responsive to their complaints.

The fact that board members are appointed rather than elected, he said, suggests members must have political "pull." He said he thinks members should be elected.

How do residents in the Community Board 2 area see their board?

Community Board 2 represents more than 100,000 Islanders. Since January the board has responded to 350 complaints from residents, that were received at its office in the administration building at Sea View Hospital and Home.

Yet a random telephone survey of residents indicates that the majority of Community Board 2 residents know little about their community board.

Some homeowners frankly admitted they didn't know which community board area they were in. Others said they never thought of calling the board's

office with a problem; they thought first of calling Borough Hall or one of the city agencies.

Often community boards function as a liaison between homeowners and city agencies. Each community board employs a district service manager who deals directly with Borough Hall and city agencies. Lillian Prado is district service manager for Community Board 2.

Coterminality — aligning health, police, fire, and sanitation districts with community board boundaries — "should increase the response and cooperation we usually get from city agencies," Manifold predicted.

"We have a lot of problems that will be around for a while, like flooding, potholes and police and sanitation service, but we'll keep hammering away at them. We also have a lot of work we can do in the areas of care for the elderly and services to the youth of our board area," Manifold said.

The board, he added, could benefit by the addition of members with professional expertise in a particular area such as health care, education or zoning laws.

Whatever the future holds for Community Board 2, board members are certain it will require decisions on increasingly complex and specialized issues such as energy, pollution, ecology and health care. This will require more knowledge and preparation, more time and dedication from board members who work in a volunteer capacity.

(This is the third in a four-part series.)