

FBI probing threats

Staten Island, N.Y. Thursday, October 11, 1979

By DIANE C. LORE

At least a dozen Staten Island residents have been questioned by the FBI in an ongoing investigation into selection of group home sites for the mentally retarded in the Community Board 2 area, the Advance learned yesterday.

Federal investigators, acting under special orders from the Justice Department in Washington, have interviewed Islanders over the past two months to determine if the civil rights of the retarded were violated during the selection of group home sites, and if community residents opposed to certain sites knowingly tried to undermine placement efforts through threats, harassment and incidents of violence, sources said.

The FBI initially denied knowledge of the investigation and later refused to discuss the case.

Among those who have been interviewed by investigators, however, are several Community Board 2 members, officials involved with the selection of sites and community placement of retarded, community residents and homeowners who attempted to sell their homes to the state for use as group homes.

Several Islanders interviewed — who requested they not be named — said investigators asked if they had received threats or had been harassed in any manner; if they knew of incidents of harassment, and if they believed a violation of civil rights had occurred.

The interviews, which seldom lasted more than 30 minutes, reportedly took place either in the Staten Island FBI office at 45 Bay St., St. George, or by

over group home sites on Island

The board currently "has no plans" to challenge Introne's decision, said Jack Deitch, vice chairman of the board. Once the 30-day time period in which the board can appeal the decision runs out, Deitch said, "the matter will die on its own."

In the six months between the board's public hearing and Introne's decision, the number of sites has been pared from five to two.

Three homeowners hastily withdrew plans to sell their homes to the state after they allegedly received threats to their lives and property. Several community board members were also repeatedly "pressured" into voting against the sites.

The FBI is believed to be investigating the following:

John Tillou and Scott Booth, representing the Staten Island Developmental Center at the Board 2 meeting in June, had to be escorted from the room by police after they received threats. Earlier in the meeting, Booth was reportedly escorted to a phone booth and forced to accept a call informing him one of the homes had been withdrawn as a site. He then delivered the message to board members.

On the night of a board meeting in June, a board official allegedly received a call at home, threatening a family member with broken bones unless the sites were voted down. After the meeting, the board official received a call notifying her she was "off the hook."

The son of one homeowner who offered his home for sale as a group home was reportedly attacked and hit over the head with a pipe. Police have no record of the incident, however, and one source said the homeowner was likely warned not to report it.

investigation, adding that the probe "is a surprise to me."

"It could very well be a violation of civil rights, in the sense that the retarded should have the freedom to live where they choose — the same basic right accorded to everyone," she explained.

One community board member questioned by the FBI, who is an attorney, said he believes theoretically the state may be violating the civil rights of both the retarded and homeowners in the community by imposing as law guidelines governing the selection of group home sites. The legislation governing the selection of group home sites is known as the Padavan Law after state Sen. Frank Padavan, a Queens Republican.

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 a method of emptying large institutions.

At a public hearing in May attended by 600 people, the group home issue was hotly contested by dozens of homeowners. They said they opposed the sites because they were either located on busy streets, or too near schools, hospitals and other community-based facilities. Some homeowners feared their property values would decline.

In June, Board 2 overwhelmingly rejected five group home sites, but last month, Mental Retardation Commissioner

James Introne ruled in favor of the locations.

phone. Agent Frank Bolling is reportedly heading the probe.

Investigators began their probe in mid-August, the same time Community Board 2 was engaged in state hearings attempting to prove the board area was "oversaturated" with community-based care facilities.

Joseph Manifold, chairman of Board 2, said investigators came down to the board's offices at Sea View Hospital and Home and reviewed the board's tapes and minutes of a public hearing on the group home sites in May, along with

committee meetings and the board's monthly meeting last June, where members voted overwhelmingly to reject the proposed sites.

"We were a bit surprised," Manifold said. "We had a choice to voluntarily cooperate or have them come in with an order. We felt it was easier to cooperate with them at the onset. The information they wanted was a matter of public record," he added.

It is not clear exactly how the FBI became involved in the issue. According to Manifold, several individuals or groups could have requested an investigation, charging violation of civil rights.

"It could have been the parents or guardians of one of the retarded children, the Borough Developmental Services Office, the Willowbrook Review Panel, any one of several advocacy groups for the retarded, or even one of the people who claimed they were harassed or threatened," Manifold said.

Sonia Braniff, chairman of the Borough Developmental Services Office said the her office did not prompt the in-