

Views aired on group home siting law

By BRUCE ALPERT

Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly yesterday heard conflicting evaluations of a three-year-old state law regulating site selection of community residences for former patients of state institutions for the mentally ill and mentally retarded.

Officials representing South Beach Psychiatric Center and the New York State Association for Retarded Children argued that the regulations, which require public input on proposed community residences, make it difficult, and often impossible, to find appropriate sites for their clients.

But representatives of a Long Island group fighting the planned opening of a group home for the retarded in their neighborhood said the law forces communities to accept homes that are not in the interest of local residents or the clients they purport to serve.

The comments were made at a public hearing held by Mrs. Connelly, chairwoman of the Assembly Mental Health Committee, in Manhattan. Mrs. Connelly, a West Brighton Democrat, and other lawmakers are considering changes in the 1978 site selection law, that requires state officials to give communities 40 days to dispute a proposed community residence serving four or more patients.

John W. Bertrand, executive director of the New York State Association for Retarded Children, said provisions in the law allowing communities to delay approval of proposed community residences has kept many residents languishing unnecessarily in state institutions for the retarded.

"If there were evidence to show that the presence of a community residence for the retarded would in some way harm a neighborhood, there might be a need for such restrictions," Bertrand said. "In fact, however, studies have shown that the presence of a community residence does not lower property values."

Robert Reise of Effective Siting of Community Residences, however, told Mrs. Connelly that the law forces communities to accept inappropriate group home sites.

In his Long Island community, Reise said, the state has proposed a group home for the retarded on a heavily traveled street, where the residents of the home would be in "constant danger."

But the way the law is written, Reise said, it is up to the local government to offer alternatives sites if it considers the state proposal unsuitable. Unfortunately, he said, it is "political-

ly unfeasible" to expect a local government to come up with a site considering the unpopularity of group homes.

In the end, he said, a local government would rather accept an unsuitable site proposed by the state rather than come up with its own alternative.

Dr. Harvey J. Lieberman, chief of the community residential treatment service of South Beach Psychiatric Center, argued that the siting law should be changed, not to make it tougher to locate group homes, but rather to make it easier.

"Historically, site selection approval has been deferred by local community planning boards to emotionally charged open public hearings," Lieberman said. "These public forums often result in intense pressure being placed upon local boards not to approve the site..."

Lieberman proposed that a state agency be created to consider proposed community residences and that it be empowered to hold "closed" hearings on proposed sites.

Also speaking at the hearing was Charlotte Dizard, chairwoman of the Human Resources Committee of Community Board 1. She told Mrs. Connelly that any change in the state siting law must reflect the need to present oversaturation of any one community with group homes.

Noting that Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, is under court order to reduce its resident population, Ms. Dizard said "it is absolutely imperative that equity be adhered to in assigning community and apartment residence beds" for center clients among the city's 59 community boards.