

Yorkers and the taxpayers they are supposed to be representing.

"These people (homeowners) don't want anything around them. The first thing they talk about is their property value going down because of the group home coming in," commented Frank Beraud, district manager of Community Board 3. "But there are other issues we should be discussing, like oversaturating one neighborhood with too many group homes, staffing, supervision, parking — but because of this property value question, we never get to any of these points."

Despite the last few years of intense community opposition, lawsuits, and in one case, a suspicious fire in a Dongan Hills house that was scheduled to be occupied by the retarded, some group homes have managed to buck the undercurrent of hostility, and, today, co-exist amicably with their neighbors.

The Advance talked to more than a dozen homeowners throughout the Island who have been residing on the same block — and some, next door — to group homes established within the last five years.

Although some of these facilities are limited to juvenile offenders or troubled youths in foster care programs, they are still group homes subject to the same criticism or praise as residences operated for the retarded or physically disabled.

By and large, the same neighbors who protested the opening of group homes in their communities, who signed their names to petitions and who dipped into their pockets to finance unsuccessful lawsuits, have mellowed in their assignments of the group homes being operated near them.

"They've been very quiet. I don't think anybody could complain," said one Grasmere resident who lives across the street from a home for the retarded at 630 Hylan Blvd. The woman said her daughter, who lives in the same house, was a member of the civic association which fought a two-year legal battle to



**A group of troubled teen-agers lives in this home at 269 Howard Ave., Grymes Hill, which an area resident says could be better maintained.**

S.I. Advance Photo by Barry Schwartz

halt the home's opening. "Just a few months ago, my daughter said she was sorry she ever tried to stop it. There have never been any problems."

Other homeowners made similar comments. Joseph Holzka, an attorney who lives two doors away from a group home at 200 Tysen St., New Brighton, said the facility blends in with the character of the neighborhood and has had no bearing on property values since it opened in 1979.

*For a look at how other Islanders' view group homes; see Just Asking on Page A 13.*

Holzka added, however, "there are still legitimate arguments to be made against saturating a neighborhood with a heavy social burden" and points to a 427-bed adult home in the New Brighton area which has had a far greater effect on the community than a group home providing care for a handful of disabled adults.

On Emerson Hill, where residents charged in a court suit that a group home for the developmentally disabled at 8 Diana Trail would cause "irreparable harm" to the neighborhood, the climate has changed.

Paul DeStefano, a neighboring homeowner, said there have been no problems with the children or the operation. He said, though, that because the home is so heavily staffed — each of the five children has one attendant — employee cars have spilled onto the narrow dead-end street, making it difficult for fire and

sanitation vehicles to maneuver.

"As far as the children go, it's worked out beautifully. They deserve a break and I don't think anyone has any complaints," he said. "But God forbid if there's a fire in that house, there's no way the fire trucks could get in there."

For the most part, homeowners living in the vicinity of group homes for the mentally or physically disabled said they experienced nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, most said the homes were virtually identical to any other on the block occupied by a family.

However, those living near houses leased or owned by agencies providing care to juvenile offenders or youths from broken homes, were more critical. Most complained that the houses were not maintained the way others in the neighborhood are, and recited incidents of rowdiness, theft and vandalism stemming from poor supervision or the more difficult nature of the young people themselves.

*Page 2 of 3*