

Vote for shelter site seen as a 'first step'

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A Community Board 2 resolution supporting the use of a vacant building at the Staten Island Developmental Center as a shelter for the homeless has thrown the ball into the court of city and state agencies, advocates said yesterday.

"The state might not approve the site we identified, but at least we have taken a first step," Lillian Prado, the board's district manager, said. "The mayor has asked each community board to locate a site where homeless people could be housed, and we've been racking our brains for over a year to find a spot where it wouldn't be right smack in the middle of a community."

But Thomas Prisco, the chairman of the board's Health and Hospitals Committee, which suggested housing up to 50 homeless people at the Willowbrook facility, admitted there were many details to be worked out. Board members have not yet looked at unused buildings at the center, and the board has not yet contacted state and city officials whose consent would be needed.

"But at least we have the approval (of the community board)," Prisco said. "Now the question is whether we can follow through."

James Walsh, director of the Willowbrook complex, said that without a firm proposal from a shelter operator, it would be difficult to assess the feasibility of the idea. He added that the matter was never discussed with him prior to the Board 2 vote Tuesday night.

He did note, however, that in light of a court decree to depopulate the center, there could be legal implications to consider in the establishment of a shelter. "I would want to know about food services and security," he said, "because I have an obligation to

ensure that the shelter would not pose a problem for the residents who will still be here."

Walsh added that should a proposal surface, he would be asked to make a recommendation, but that the decision to lease a building at the center would come from the state Office of General Services. General Services, which controls the disposition of all state properties, has been examining uses for the Willowbrook complex after its residents have been placed into community facilities and the site is declared excess property.

James Casale, an Eltingville resident who heads a non-profit group picked by the Human Resources Administration to operate an Island shelter, said the center was explored last year as a site. He said that while state-owned property is "ideal" because no rent would be charged, the location is not as convenient as the North Shore, where many of the borough's homeless live.

Casale was not aware yesterday of Board 2's vote in favor of a Willowbrook location and said he, too, had not been contacted by the board to discuss the matter.

Casale said his organization, Community Advocates of Shelters for Adults, has been striving to keep its shelter operation to no more than 50 or 60 persons. The vacant buildings at Willowbrook, however, could accommodate as many as 200. "We purposely looked for buildings which could not be expanded," he said, such as the former nurse's residence at the old Staten Island Hospital in Tompkinsville, which the organization targeted after a nine-month search.

With a larger building, Casale alluded to the possibility that social services agencies could force his group to take in homeless from all parts of the city when other shelters are filled, if they know that space exists at an Island facility.

Borough President Anthony Gaeta has gone on record as opposing large shelters, and said he prefers smaller shelters in each of the Island's three community board areas.

Casale also pointed out that many of the Willowbrook structures would require more capital expenditures to renovate because they are laid out in wards. "We would never want a ward," he said. "You can't lump whole families and homeless adults into one big room." And, because the center is served by only one bus route, the operators would probably need to purchase a van to transport those homeless who are unable or unwilling to take a bus.

James Mates, the facilitator for a borough-wide task force on shelters, said he agreed with Casale about the site, but still supported Board 2's action. "All the community boards have been taking a responsible attitude toward the situation, because we don't want to be dumped on," Mates said.

"I feel it was a responsible response on Board 2's part, and certainly in the spirit of sharing resources throughout the Island. That's what the task force is all about."

Casale said it is conceivable that his group could operate more than one Island shelter. No new requests for shelter proposals are expected to be issued by the Human Resources Administration, and the advocates' proposal was the only one selected for the Island by the agency.