

Editorial Page—

Our opinion/

Bad week for compassion

There are times when the lack of compassion among Staten Islanders for those less fortunate than themselves is simply appalling.

This week, we are sorry to say, was one of those times.

In two separate incidents, one day apart, South Shore residents proved that they can be as heartless as the worst of them. On Monday night they defeated plans for a six-bed shelter for homeless women. On Tuesday night they came out in force against a group home for 10 autistic children.

They may try to cover their actions with pleasant explanations, but the truth is much simpler than that. In a word, we call it selfishness.

In the shelter incident, the Rev. David Lovett, pastor of the Richboro Baptist Church in Eltingville, announced that the church would not open a six-bed women's shelter as previously planned, citing "obscene and abusive opposition (that) reached the point of intimations of violence."

Not content with shooting down the shelter, some neighbors talked of getting the pastor transferred out of the community. That's plain spiteful.

In the group home incident, about 200 South Shore residents showed up at a Community Board 3 hearing to protest a plan to convert a one-family house in Eltingville into a home for 10 autistic children, ranging in age from 7 to 19. At the proposed home, the children, some of whom can't even speak, would be taught such necessary tasks as dressing, eating and cleaning.

In both cases, neighbors gave specific reasons for opposing the shelter and group home. But the reasons couldn't hide the real selfishness behind their actions.

In Eltingville, a Staten Island councilman said the homeless shelter doesn't belong in a community of one- and two-family homes. He said the neighborhood has no problems now and wants none in the future. He offered no alternative sites.

In the autistic home debate a leader of Staten Island's biggest environmental group, a woman

who has spent years fighting to save trees, wants no part of an operation to save people. She said the area already has enough "public service facilities," and specifically cited Blue Heron Pond Park, which she was instrumental in creating. She, too, offered no alternative sites.

It goes beyond the South Shore.

While Eltingville residents were shooting down a six-bed homeless shelter in their residential neighborhood, Community Board 1 on the North Shore was opposing a 60-bed shelter in the institutional setting of the former Staten Island Hospital, saying it preferred to see several smaller shelters sprinkled throughout the Island.

In that case, the board's chairman said the Tompkinsville-New Brighton area already has many problems to deal with and doesn't need to be saddled with one more. He, too, offered no alternative sites, although he did send a letter to churches, synagogues and non-profit groups in the area, asking them to consider housing as few as two or three homeless people.

The only positive action came from the usually-conservative Community Board 2, which covers the mid-Island area. It voted to support the concept of a 50-bed homeless shelter at the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook.

Even as a positive step, it says more about the problem than the solution. Community boards generally will support a group home or shelter only when it can be put someplace far away from complaining neighbors — someplace, in fact, like the Staten Island Developmental Center.

Where does that leave us? No better off than we were a year ago.

Nobody wants to take responsibility for approving a homeless shelter, or a group home for autistic children, or mentally retarded adults. That would mean taking a little heat, which is something our elected officials and community boards can't stand.

Taking a stand for those less fortunate than ourselves would take compassion and guts, two traits that seem to be in alarmingly short supply.