

Board hears objections to planned group home

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About 25 residents of Annadale and surrounding communities attended a Community Board 3 public hearing last night, mostly to protest a proposal to lease an Annadale house to use as a group home for mentally retarded adults.

The home, at 825 Woodrow Rd., would be leased from an unidentified owner to Staten Island Aid for the Retarded, a private non-profit agency. Six retarded men and two women would live in the home, supervised by one to three staff workers at all times, Joan Hodum, the organization's director, said. The length of the lease and the amount of rent to be paid were not disclosed.

For six hours a day, five days a week, the home's residents would attend Staten Island Aid's day programs. At other times, they would be involved in organized activities in the home, outings to local parks, beaches and other sites and other activities, Phyllis Murray, resident supervisor for the agency, said.

But, residents complained that the home doesn't have enough yard space for eight people, lacks adequate septic and drainage systems and is in an undeveloped area that doesn't have enough public transportation or recreational facilities. They expressed concern about potential problems among the staff, the occupants and neighborhood children.

"You want eight people and three shifts of staff in the house. Well, who is this staff? Are they the same as the staff at Willowbrook?" Augustine Iacobellis, who is planning to build a house on nearby Belfield Avenue, asked. "Look at the little kids here. What happens if one of the clients does something to one of the kids — will you come back here and say you're sorry?"

He also projected that the lot would become undersized if

Woodrow Road's width is expanded, as the city has proposed to do.

Vicky Martucci, whose house on Averton Street borders the site, said, "This home is in my back yard. It's 5 feet away. And, I have a little bungalow with three small children and a brand new septic system. When it rains, I have to leave my house or I can't use my toilet because it floods."

But representatives from Staten Island Aid and the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities stressed that residents of the home would be screened prior to placement, are carefully supervised and are harmless. They said the house meets stringent state criteria and has an adequate septic system. The home's staff most likely will be chosen from people currently working at the agency both part- and full-time, and will be screened carefully before hiring, they said.

Carol Rothfeld, coordinator of site development for the Staten Island Borough Developmental Services Office, the state agency that located the house, said that a soil percolation test conducted five years ago found the septic tank to be adequate for the site and capable of holding up to 900 gallons. The tank later was expanded to hold 1,500 gallons, when the builder decided to convert the house from a one-family to a two-family home, she said.

"We haven't done a test since then, but the architect's feasibility report (completed in April) indicated that there was no seepage or water problems in the lowest levels of this house," she said. Responding to community requests, she nonetheless agreed to ask the state to conduct another percolation test on the property before the community board meets to vote on the site.

After last night's hearing, members of the board's Human Resources Committee, chaired by Stanley Buraczynski Jr., will

make a recommendation to the full board about whether or not to approve the site, including any stipulations.

The board will vote on the issue at its next meeting, which will be Tuesday. Its recommendation will be submitted to the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, which has ultimate authority over whether or not to approve the site.

The community was given short notice about the proposal and the hearing because the board only received a copy of the proposal June 7 and has to respond within 40 days, said Maxine Spierer, chairwoman.

The two-family, wood-frame house is located on a plot of land 50 feet by 113 feet 6 inches at the intersection of Delmar Avenue and Woodrow Road. While its back yard and yard on one side are narrow, the house has an adequate-sized side yard bordering Woodrow Road, which will be fenced in once the proposal is approved, said Ms. Murray.

Residents at the Annadale home would be in their 30s and 40s and be trained in daily living skills, she added. At least half of the clients will probably come from a group home that the agency currently runs in Tottenville, because the agency is restructuring its homes to make them more homogeneous. In addition to Tottenville, which will eventually house older clients, Ms. Murray said that the agency's home on the Staten Island Developmental Center grounds in Willowbrook will be used as a halfway house to train people not used to living in the community to take care of themselves.

Minor renovations to meet state criteria for group homes will be made, Mrs. Rothfeld said. There will be five bedrooms, a living room, dining room, kitchen, laundry room and recreation area.