

Statens Island Advance

MARCH 31, 2000

Island needs 35 homes for disabled



"These group homes seem to ignite such fear, opposition and in some cases just out and out hatred of the unknown. It's up to us, the mental health advocates, to make the extra efforts, to make a dent in those fears, those hatreds."

Councilman Steve Fiala
(R-South Shore)



"I'm not going to fall victim to a mob mentality. So [opponents of community residences] can threaten to vote for the other guy all they want. I'm going to stand up for what I believe in and do the right thing."

Councilman James Oddo
(R-Mid-Island)

■ An uproar on the South Shore over the placement of 1 home for 6 retarded adults highlights the fact that Islanders do not understand who these people are, proponents maintain

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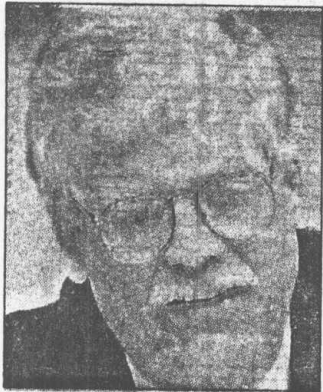
"I share the view that we as a community have an obligation to take care of our own."

Councilman Jerome X. O'Donovan (D-North Shore)



"There has to be an ongoing educational tool at a very young level so that children grow up without seeing these differences, but that everybody is the same."

Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly (D-North Shore)



"I believe that each of these proposals has to stand on its own. People in a neighborhood are entitled to ask questions. They are entitled to a full and fair hearing of any complaints they have about any of these proposals."

Assemblyman Eric Vitaliano (D-Mid-Island)



"It has been my policy to follow the recommendations of the community board on group homes."

Assemblyman Robert A. Straniere (R-South Shore)



"I support residential sites for those with developmental disabilities. My experience has been they actually make better neighbors than you would have otherwise by the luck of the draw."

State Sen. Vincent Gentile (D-Brooklyn/East Shore)



"The most concrete method you can pursue as a legislator is to vote budgetary support [for such programs] and I do consistently."

State Sen. John J. Marchi (R-Staten Island)

ADVANCE FILE PHOTOS

* Rep. Vito Fossella could not be reached for comment

The recent move to establish a community residence for mentally retarded adults in a South Shore neighborhood is not an isolated incident.

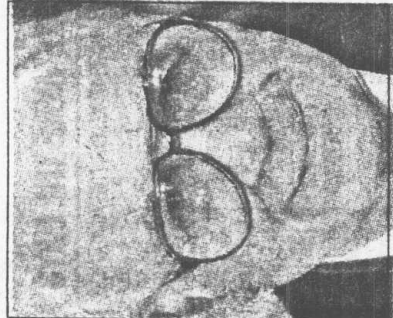
Staten Island can expect 35 to 40 similar residences to spring up across the borough during the next four years, local social services providers say.

The predicted increase is due to a state initiative — called New York State Creating Alternatives in Residential Environments and Services (NYS CARES) — unveiled by Gov. George Pataki 18 months ago to phase in enough communal living space for thousands of New Yorkers who have been languishing for years on a massive waiting list while funds were hashed out in Albany.

On Staten Island, 209 developmentally disabled adults are awaiting accommodation, said Bob Witkowsky, director of the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office.

“But that list is growing,” Witkowsky told the Advance Editorial Board yesterday. “It’s growing [by about 30 names a year] as people move into Staten Island and it’s growing as parents grow older and can no longer take care of their children.”

On Tuesday, Community Board 3 voted overwhelmingly to reject the establishment of a community residence for six mentally retarded adults on End Place in Greenridge.



“We have our work cut out for us, but that goes with the job. You need to take positions sometimes that others are going to disagree with you about. But that’s what leadership is all about.”

Borough President
Guy V. Molinari

William D’Ambrosio, the chairman of the Human Resources Committee that recommended the board oppose the plan, had argued the presence of the residence would “alter the quiet cul-de-sac environment of the immediate area” and “hampers the fundamental goal of socialization and integration” of the residents into the community because of the relatively remote location of the house and the “deep-rooted and intense resistance of the community.”

HeartShare, a Brooklyn-based social services provider, wants to purchase 119 End Pl. for six Islanders, ages 19 to 24, who are mildly or moderately retarded. Some of the potential residents work part-time at McDonald’s; others are engaged full-time in vocational training programs. None takes psychiatric medication but all require 24-hour supervision.

Proponents of the plan believe fear and misinformation are primarily behind the strong objections of area residents.

“There’s a lot of misinformation about who the developmentally disabled are,” said Witkowsky. “It is not mental illness. It is mental retardation, autism, cerebral palsy.”

Lorraine De Santis, whose 23-year-old son lives in a community residence for the developmentally disabled in Dongan Hills, agreed.

“Maybe [the critics] don’t have someone like this in their family,” she told the Editorial Board. “If they did, they could not say the things they do. My son is like a 2-year-old. He’s not a criminal. He doesn’t make the community unsafe.”

Some local social services providers expressed disappointment that no elected officials attended the raucous meeting of Board 3 on Tuesday, especially after area lawmakers turned out earlier this month for a legislative breakfast hosted by the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Council (SIDDC) to

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Debate

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pledge their full support for such initiatives.

"We need more of our legislators to get out and say they are in favor of community residences, not just to say it behind closed doors," SIDDC chairwoman Donna Long told the Editorial Board. "They should attend these community board meetings in their districts or, if they send a representative, the representative should get up and say they support residences."

Councilman Steve Fiala (R-South Shore), whose district includes Board 3, said he has not had time yet to form a definitive opinion on the End Place proposal because he just learned about it late last week.

"I believe there is merit on both sides," he said. "But I have great concern about placing our children in an area where there is such hostility and where the notification was less than forthcoming. There are issues on both sides that are compelling."

Consequently, Fiala asked his representative to remain silent at Tuesday's meeting, he said.

"I don't have to operate on the same timetable as the community board," he said. "I do not have to respond because people suddenly wake up and something has been thrust upon them."

The "critical timetable," he added, is the one set by the commissioner of the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), who will make a final determination on the End Place property after conducting hearings on the issue.

"I support the establishment of homes," Fiala added. "I would love to forge a working relationship between this agency and the community."

State Assemblyman Robert A. Straniero (R-South Shore), whose district includes the End Place property, said, "It has been my policy to follow the recommendations of the community board on group homes." He said he supports such community residences in general, but not the HeartShare proposal "for reasons that make a lot of sense to me," referring to the board's rationale.

Indeed, most of the borough's

elected officials say they support the establishment of new community residences for the developmentally disabled and plan to work toward educating residents on their importance.

Borough President Guy V. Molinari has vowed to take the lead.

"A lot of it is education. Fear feeds upon fear," he said. "I want to demonstrate that this is our problem; not my problem, not your problem. This is an issue that could affect virtually anybody. I would like to think people care and want to help."

To that end, Molinari plans to conduct public forums for residents to air their concerns and ask questions about community residences.

"I would hope the other elected officials and community activists would join in this mission," he said. "If all the elected officials could send out the same message, we could be very helpful in not letting this thing get out of control."

Meanwhile, Councilman Jerome X. O'Donovan (D-North Shore), who said the End Place residence "should and will be approved," is

calling on Molinari to set aside time at the Borough Board meeting in May to discuss what is sure to evolve into a boroughwide white-hot issue.

"I would like to request that an invitation be extended to OMRDD officials, local not-for-profit group home sponsors, and parent groups to ... discuss the need, the programming and perhaps to address the often cited concerns of oversaturation and other impacts which some associate with group homes," he said in a letter to the borough president.

Fiala, too, plans to organize public symposiums in which state officials, civic leaders, community board members and residents can come together to discuss the issue.

Concerning the situation on End Place, Fiala said, "I don't want to see a repeat of this."

Therefore, he said, he will "sit down with commissioners, the agency and the neighborhood and say, 'OK, this thing is probably going to come here, and based on your legitimate concerns, what can we do to raise your comfort level, because there's no longer the luxury to say no, no, no.'"