

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.'"