

Editorial

OUR OPINION

'Concerns' and bias

When people are shopping for a new home, they have their own set of criteria to gauge the candidate houses they see. The kitchen might be too small in one, or the living room in another doesn't get enough afternoon sun or there's not enough closet space in a third.

HeartShare, a Brooklyn-based social services provider, thought it had found the perfect community residence on End Place in Greenridge for six mildly to moderately retarded young adults, all of whom are Staten Islanders themselves who wanted to live in their home borough to be with their family and friends.

This time, it was the neighbors, abetted by Community Board 3, that came up with a list of things wrong with the place: It wasn't near enough to public transportation or stores; it wasn't the right neighborhood for them, and so on and so on. The only thing they left out was that the living room didn't get enough sun. As a result of those often ferociously articulated "concerns" about the ultimate happiness of the prospective residents in their new neighborhood — coupled with a few veiled threats — Community Board 3 caved in and recommended against approval of HeartShare's purchase of the End Place residence, citing the same concerns.

By Perumalla

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People can nit-pick the selection of any home as a community residence for people with disabilities and they often do. Pick any house on Staten Island, and, if you look hard enough, you can find reasons why that house shouldn't be used as a group home, darn the luck. Oddly enough, it seems that with almost every residence that is proposed as a group home by a social service agency that works with people — Staten Island people — with developmental disabilities, residents come up with a list of reasons — all ostensibly legitimate — for rejecting the proposal.

Some would like to attribute this to poor planning on the part of the agencies in selecting sites, but when it happens in instance after instance, it's no coincidence. Some of the excuses thrown up by the residents would be laughable, if they didn't serve to mask such fearful, ignorant intentions.

"You stripped us of everything. You ripped out my heart," one Greenridge woman screamed at the Community Board 3 meeting the other night. Aside from the drama and passion in such a statement, what does it mean? Six mildly retarded adults living under expert supervision in your neighborhood "rips out your heart"? Should such an irrational statement even be taken seriously for one moment by officials?

"I finally found the perfect community to raise my children in for 25 years. Now I will be among strangers and there will be more traffic," cried another, who moved to the neighborhood two years ago. But wasn't she a stranger among strangers when she moved in two years ago? Didn't her family and its comings and goings bring more traffic? Did the neighbors have a right to vote her out? And what is a "perfect community"? One where everyone passes an admissions test administered by other residents according to their prejudices?

The most astonishing excuse of all was seconded by Community Board 3, which said in its summary justifying the rejection that the "fundamental goal of socialization and integration with the community will be considerably hampered and perhaps unachievable due to the very deep-rooted and intense resistance of the community to welcome or accept the proposed group home."

In other words, any neighborhood that can demonstrate a "deep-rooted and intense resistance" and can persuade the community board that the group home residents won't be made welcome can expect an exemption from Community Board 3? Is that the precedent the board wants to set? And do people in the community really want to live next door to neighbors who might make living in the group home somehow dangerous for the residents? Are those apparently potentially dangerous neighbors somehow less threatening than retarded people?

Keep in mind that our borough requires another 35 to 40 new community residences in the coming years to care for more than developmental disabled adults — Staten Islanders all — who require supervision and assistance. And under the New York State Creating Alternatives in Residential Environments and Services program, the money is there for these homes to be acquired. This issue will come up again and again, and so will the excuses.

William D'Ambrosio, the chairman of the CB 3 Human Resources Committee that recommended against the plan, praised HeartShare's "excellent" record and insisted that the rejection was on the merits in this case, and not a policy statement. "We hope it doesn't [set a precedent]," he said. "We're going to judge each group home on its own merits. We tried to report exactly what was happening in this case. As a group, we advocate for mental health. This particular site was not appropriate for these clients."

He insisted also that his board used the same evaluation criteria used by the state, but added that it was likely the state agency would overrule CB3's recommendation.

Everybody — the community board members, the residents, the elected officials and the state officials — knows exactly what's going on here: Some Islanders don't want people with developmental disabilities on their block. They may not want African-Americans or Asians or Latinos or wheelchair-bound people in their neighborhoods either, but they have no legal power to express such views, let alone influence a community board to side with them. But the law says that in the case of group residences for the developmentally disabled, the community board should have an advisory capacity.

In the case of the End Place residence, the community board was reflecting the wishes of the neighbors of the proposed residence, but it also endorsed, inadvertently or not, the malevolent delusion that because you paid so much for a house, or bought in a certain neighborhood or pay taxes, you can pick and choose your neighbors.

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The community board should reconsider the far-reaching implications of its statements, and so should elected officials such as South Shore Assemblyman Robert Straniere, who says he defers to the community, and South Shore Councilman Stephen Fiala, who says while he supports such efforts on behalf of the developmentally disabled in general, he sees "merit on both sides" in this case. That's the standard line for politicians, and not just Mr. Fiala, who don't want to upset constituents irrationally opposed to such a demonstrably harmless, well-intended plan, however unfair, irresponsible and that opposition may get — and still appear sympathetic to the cause. Generalities are fine; the specifics is where they develop their concerns.

This episode is a cue for all of Staten Island's elected officials to go on the record and reject community prejudice couched as "concern" and support unequivocally, decisively in the strongest terms, the ideal of every corner of our borough being a community enriched by all kinds of people, even those whose lifestyle and limitations require supervision in a group residential setting. Indeed, the best communities are those that embrace that principle, as some Island neighborhoods have already found.

Borough President Guy Molinari has taken the lead on this important issue, saying boldly, "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."

Elected officials, you're on.