



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ FRANK J. JOHNS

Councilmen James Oddo, left, and Stephen Fiala and Kathleen Broderick, OMRDD associate commissioner, at meeting in Blue Heron Park to discuss the NY Cares Program.

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## Informational meeting held on community residences

■ Meeting was attended by politicians, community board members

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With its thriving sweet gum forests, colorful wildflowers and shimmering ponds, the Blue Heron Park Nature Center, in Annadale, is a haven of serenity. But yesterday, the 222-acre home to wood ducks, warblers and egrets provided the backdrop for a discussion on one of the Island's most volatile topics in recent months: Community residences for the developmentally disabled.

"There isn't a more contentious issue that we deal with," said Councilman Stephen J. Fiala (R-South Shore), who organized the two-hour informational meeting attended by about two dozen Staten Island elected officials, their representatives and community board members. "We need to be armed with the facts. The imposition of those homes — as some call it — is problematic to some communities. We have the responsibility to educate ourselves so we can educate the public."

In recent weeks, a groundswell of opposition has arisen across the Island against several proposed community residences. The homes typically house 8 to 10 developmentally disabled persons whose disabilities include mental retardation, autism, epilepsy and other impairments of the brain and central nervous system.

Though the residences are designed to provide clients with some measure of independent living and integration into the community, some neighbors view them as a headache. They commonly cite the potential for plummeting property values, increased traffic, and the influx into the neighborhood of low-paid staffers, not required by state law to undergo drug tests or criminal background checks as reasons for their objections.

Yesterday, community board representatives said the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), which oversees the residences and the service agencies that run them, must better educate an often-misinformed public about their mission and intentions.

"You need people who can go right into the neighborhood so folks know all along what this is about," said Joseph Carroll, district manager of Community Board 1. "You need to go to PTAs and community meetings and tell people, 'We're not talking about aliens, we're talking about sons and daughters.'"

"I'm 100 percent behind what you're doing, but it's got to be done correctly," Mel Kling, a Community Board 3 member told Kathleen Broderick, associate commissioner of OMRDD, who addressed the group. "The major problem is lack of communication."

According to state law, the municipality — on Staten Island, the individual community board — has 40 days to decide on a proposed community residence once the sponsoring agency formally notifies it of the chosen site. The board has four options: Accept the site, suggest alternative locations within the community board's jurisdiction, seek an extension (typi-

cally 10 to 30 days) or object to the site on the grounds of saturation.

However, community board approval is not required for the project to proceed, and rejections result in an administrative hearing, which are typically ruled in the OMRDD's favor.

Community Board 3 officials cited the short turnaround time as the reason for their rejection last month of a proposed community residence on End Place in Greenridge.

"We didn't feel we had all the information we needed," said board member Paul Kidder. "That's why we made our decision. Our feeling wasn't we didn't want group homes. We felt we didn't have enough time."

Robert Witkowsky, director of the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office, agreed to meet with community board officials to establish a procedure to give them additional notice of proposed community residences. Ms. Broderick, meanwhile, noted OMRDD carefully screens group home proposals before they are presented to community boards.

The vast majority are scrapped due to a saturation of community residences in the area or a high purchase price for the residence.

Ms. Broderick said there is an acute need for dozens of additional community residences on Staten Island. About 345 Islanders are currently awaiting placement. Living quarters for an estimated 400 to 450 developmentally disabled persons will be required over the next five years, she said.

Most said yesterday's information session and fence-mending marked an important first step toward achieving that goal.

"I think it's what we needed," said John Antoniello, Community Board 3 chairman.

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(Meeting)

Attending the meeting, in addition to Fiala and Councilman James Oddo (R-Mid-Island), were representatives of Councilman Jerome X. O'Donovan (D-North Shore), Assemblyman Robert A. Straniere (R-South Shore), state Sen. Vincent Gentile (D-East Shore/Brooklyn), Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Gov. George Pataki.