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### State gives go-ahead on residence for disabled

Objection by Community Board 3 to proposed Greenridge home is overruled; Huguenot home will be subject of a hearing tonight

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As Community Board 3 prepares to hear angry residents tonight over a proposed Huguenot community residence for developmentally disabled people, board members recently received word that the state vetoed their last recommendation to reject a similar residence in Greenridge.

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In March, the board voted against a proposal by HeartShare, a Brooklyn-based social services provider, to house six mildly and moderately retarded Staten Islanders, ages 19 to 24, at 119 End Pl. The merely advisory vote was made at an emotional meeting to the cheers of more than 200 neighbors vehemently opposed to the proposal.

William D'Ambrosio, chairman of the board's Human Resources Committee, which recommended the board oppose the plan, had argued the presence of the residence would "alter" the environment and "hamper 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."

The state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) -- which funds the homes and requires community input, but not approval -- labeled Board 3's reasons as "speculative" and gave HeartShare the green light. The board has no plans to appeal the state's decision.

Despite the resistance of neighbors, HeartShare intends on starting renovations on the home this summer and opening it to residents by November.

"We are very excited to go ahead with our plans. The family and residents are more than delighted to have their own new home and be part of the End Place neighborhood," said Katie Meskell, executive director of HeartShare.

Although HeartShare runs 13 similar homes in Brooklyn and Queens, this is its first community residence on Staten Island. Ms. Meskell said the agency will

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create a neighborhood advisory committee, in which people on the block act as liaisons between the house and agency.

"As I've met with neighbors on a one-to-one basis, they are lovely people and we know in the end that they will make lovely neighbors," Ms. Meskell said.

Residents who vehemently opposed the home are upset with the final decision, but feel they've done everything they could.

"I feel like we are saturated," said End Place resident Adele Fava. "We are nice people and I'm sure we will be accepting. I'll have to accept it, but they did an injustice."

Isabelle Schelker, whose 20-year-old developmentally disabled son will live in the home, is confident neighbors will welcome him. But she does worry about harassment.

"I think the block is lucky to get such wonderful people as neighbors. It is too bad that it takes the law to accomplish that. I hope to change the law and make it even better so we don't have to put these young adults under public scrutiny," said the Port Richmond resident.

All the new residents are Staten Islanders: Two now live on the South Shore.

The board's stance and the community's reaction were sharply criticized and Borough President Guy V. Molinari formally requested the board reconsider its vote. The suggestion was refused.

The Padavan Law -- also known as the Community Residence Site Selection Law -- gives community boards three options when faced with a proposed site for a community residence for the developmentally disabled: Accept the site, suggest an alternative or object to the site on grounds the neighborhood is already saturated with similar residences.

If a community board rejects a site on the grounds of saturation, the agency seeking to open the residence may appeal to OMRDD. After conducting hearings, the commissioner of OMRDD determines whether the site is acceptable.

HeartShare appealed Board 3's decision in March, and on May 4 members of the board and some residents and a Brooklyn lawyer representing them attended a hearing at OMRDD offices in Manhattan, where state officials heard testimony from both the board and HeartShare.

After evaluating arguments, Thomas Maul, commissioner of OMRDD, sent a letter, dated May 25, to the board stating the board's contentions were "speculative and fail to demonstrate how the proposed facility, in conjunction with existing similar facilities, would substantially alter the nature of the character of the area."

He concluded that the "sponsoring agency may seek to establish its community residence at 119 End Pl."

The letter added: "You may be assured, however, that the issues concerning staffing, safety and the location of the proposed site will be considered by this agency prior to a decision being made by the State to certify this program." Ms. Meskell explained state certification is granted when the community residence is open and running.

If the community board appeals the commissioner's decision -- something the board says it will not do in this case -- the battle would move to the Appellate Division of state Supreme Court and then, if necessary, to the state Court of

## Appeals.

Members of the board are pleased that due process was done and they had a chance to defend their stance. "It was a fair process. The trial was done in a very professional manner. To me it showed the system worked. They took everything into consideration," said Board 3 chairman John Antoniello.

The controversy regarding the Greenridge community residence sparked an aggressive campaign by community leaders, elected officials and the agencies to better educate neighbors about the homes.

"It is my hope that the community will embrace them. It may not happen overnight," said Councilman Stephen Fiala (R-South Shore), who will attend tonight's Human Resources Committee meeting on the latest community residence proposal for the South Shore.

At the meeting, members will vote on a proposal by On Your Mark, a West Brighton-based human services agency that plans to house seven developmentally disabled adults in a two-family home at 840 Stafford Ave.

This is the first community residence the board will vote on since unanimously rejecting the End Place site. The prior case was only the fifth time the board rejected a community residence in more than 20 years.

Five men and two women between the ages of 20 and 30 are slated to live in the Huguenot home. All are labeled within the moderate-to-mild range of retardation. They are Staten Island residents, with five residing on the South Shore and two from Mid-Island.

When word of the home reached residents about a month ago, the board and Fiala's office were swamped with fearful calls the first week, but have experienced a lull since.

The current homeowners of the End Place residence have received threatening phone calls and attribute a recent fistfight with a neighbor to the controversy.

Residents on the seemingly quiet block fear the home will reduce property values and that once the sale is approved, the house could potentially be used by other social-service agencies with more controversial missions. They will voice their concerns at tonight's meeting, which is scheduled for 7:30 in the board's headquarters at 655-218 Rossville Ave.

"I hope people will come in [to the meeting] better-educated and recognize it is something we can embrace as a civilized society," Fiala said.