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THE ISLAND

Debate gets heated on home for disabled

■ Residents at hearing on Huguenot residence clash with officials, clergymen

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Community Board 3's typically calm Rossville headquarters was transformed into a hotbed of controversy last night, with Huguenot residents squaring off against elected officials and clergy members over a possible home for the developmentally disabled in their neighborhood.

Spilling into the hallway, up to 150 people crammed into the windowless room as the board's Human Resource Committee gave a thumbs-up to plans by On Your Mark, a West Brighton-based human services agency, to house seven developmentally disabled adults in a two-

family home at 840 Stafford Ave.



Borough President Guy V. Molinari, right, defends the plan. Beside him are William D'Ambrosio, left, chairman of Community Board 3's Human Resources Committee, and Councilman Stephén Fiala.



There was standing room only at the hearing.

File # 12
To 6/19

Angry residents shouted at and interrupted Borough President Guy Molinari and Monsignor John Servodidio, pastor of St. Joseph's R.C. Church, Rosebank, as they gave unwavering support for the home.

"We as a community have a responsibility to take care of our own," Molinari said, disturbed by the disrespect shown the monsignor.

"I always have to defend them. It is a sin. If you are a believer, they have God-given rights to live where they want. If you are not a believer, it is a constitutional right," stated Monsignor Servodidio.

Five men and two women between the ages of 19 and 30 are slated to move into the \$400,000 mother-daughter home. All have moderate to mild retardation. Some require medication, but not psychiatric drugs.

The state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) is funding the home and requires community input, but not community approval. Most of the residents at the meeting said they understood the board's limitations, and expected the unanimous vote of support the committee gave.

The heated meeting last night was the latest in a series of confrontations over the plan. Last month, one of the Stafford Avenue home's owners got into a fistfight with a neighbor. The homeowners said they have also received threatening phone calls.

All the residents slated for the Stafford Avenue home currently live on Staten Island, with five from the South Shore and two from the Mid-Island.

Some of the homeowners at the meeting said they know the mother of one potential home resident, and attested she is "the nicest lady in the world."

Parents of the young adults told tearful stories about their children's excitement at being independent, and their own fears that one day they will die, leaving their children alone.

holding a picture of a handsome, raven-haired 19-year-old with a semi-smile, Karen Principato pleaded with residents to accept her son, Nicholas.

Residents, though, asked why the parents aren't caring for the young adults in their own homes. They also worried the facility would contribute to parking problems, explaining they moved from Brooklyn to avoid such hassles.

"He doesn't want to live with mommy," said Ms. Principato. The Great Kills resident described Nicholas as a typical young adult eager to live on his own, but who needs some assistance.

The house sits near the corner of busy Foster Road, which neighbors argue is another risk to the home residents. It is sandwiched between Michael's Landscaping and a smaller home. There is no fence between the two homes.

Residents also fear property values will be reduced, and questioned the competence of the home's staffers and how safe the developmentally disabled will be on the seemingly quiet block.

"Pity is the last thing my daughter needs. Let me worry about her safety. If you open your hearts you could gain more than property value and parking on the street," said Ida Pastena, whose 25-year-old daughter will live in the house.

"We are not against the disabled. Our block, whether you know it or not, is a problem," explained Terry Papineau. She cited vandalism, rowdy youths blasting radios and reckless cars making U-turns on the horseshoe-shaped street as some of the problems the neighborhood faces.

However, Felicia DeBetta, whose son also will also reside in the home, said "Some parents made good points and I hope the safety issues will be addressed," she said, bragging about her son Frank, who is on the wrestling team at Tottenville High School.

Joshua Gutterman, president of the Elmwood and Treetop Homeowners Association and a special education teacher for the Board of Education, said the developmentally disabled are always a target. "Some people love them, for others they are creatures of prey," he said.

"There are a dozen felons who live in this area," said Robert Kranpost a police lieutenant who lives on Stafford Avenue. "I came tonight because I was afraid, but after hearing people tonight, I welcome these people," he admits.

The borough president has been to the site and spoke with police at the 123rd Precinct stationhouse

about potential problems. He said he discussed additional police coverage* for the neighborhood if the community residence goes in.

"It may be the best thing that ever happened to the block," he suggested to residents, who then worried about an increase in parking tickets.

Ms. Papineau and other residents said they received phone calls from real estate agents informing them about the community residence and warning them to move.

Some South Shore residents lent support to the plan. "I come to the aid of anyone in the community who needs help and I would not fight this project. Where are you people when we try to fight housing on the South Shore?" asked Lorraine Sorge, president of the Staten Island Taxpayers Association.

"I'm certain there is no one in the room who has ill will. I can testify that they have the same dreams and desires as other kids. Fears will fall because you are going to monitor the home," predicted Monsignor Peter Finn, co-vicar of Staten Island.

In terms of property values, Deputy Borough President Jim Molinaro pointed to a community residence in Emerson Hill that opened in 1978; now, multimillion dollar homes are being built nearby.

Eugene Spatz, executive director of On Your Mark, attested to his "high quality staff."

"We are all educated. We do care and try to help the community. We get joy out of the of the job and are not paid a lot of money," said Kathy Denmark, a manager at another On Your Mark community residence.

The agency requires criminal background checks but not drug tests — a practice neighbors question.

"How many of you have been tested for drugs at your job?" quizzed Councilman Stephen Fiala (R-South Shore) to the show of approximately 20 raised hands. "If it is a concern, the route to go is through legislation to require drug testing," he advised.

Residents wanted guarantees their real estate values will go up and kids will be safe. Spatz guaranteed the potential residents pose no risk to children or property values.

Another concern was that once the sale is approved, the house could potentially be used by other social service agencies with more controversial missions, such as drug treatment or homeless services. Spatz said the community residence is a permanent home for the young adults.

Although residents were notified about the home approximately a month ago, they feel the residence is being "snuck" into the community. Spatz confessed the site was identified in May, but family and architects also had to approve the house.

Last night was the first time a Board 3 committee has voted on a community residence since it unanimously rejected a similar facility in Greenridge in March. Residents vehemently opposed the plan.

Introduced by HeartShare, a Brooklyn-based social services provider in Brooklyn, the March proposal was to house six mildly and moderately retarded Islanders, ages 19 to 24, at 119 End Pl.

HeartShare appealed the board's stance, which the OMRDD commissioner vetoed on May 25. The home will open in November.

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 the grounds the neighborhood is already saturated with similar residences. In this case, similar residences mean other community residences for the developmentally disabled.

Reflecting on the tragedies of Willowbrook State School, where patients were "treated like prisoners" and "found in their own feces," Fiala said community residences are the answer to such abuses.

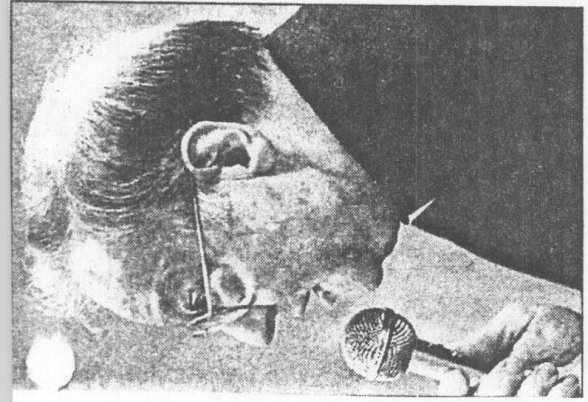
The full board will vote on the proposed Huguenot home at its monthly meeting on June 27 in Staten Island University Hospital, Prince's Bay.

Representatives for Assemblyman Robert Straniere (R-South Shore) and State Senator John Marchi (R-Staten Island) attended the meeting.



ADVANCE PHOTOS ■ JOSHUA CARP

Eugene Spatz, executive director of On Your Mark, addresses the group home meeting.



Monsignor John Servodidio speaks at the meeting.



ADVANCE PHOTOS ■ JOSHUA CARP

A member of the audience expresses his anger over a plan to house disabled persons in Huguenot.