

Community residence OK'd, drugstore rejected by CB 3

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Summer break doesn't come without its final challenges, as Community Board 3 discovered last night, when it decided to support a community residence in Huguenot and reject a Walgreens slated for Eltingville.

Gathering in Staten Island University Hospital, Prince's Bay, for its last meeting of the season, the board weighed support and opposition to a proposed community residence slated for 840 Stafford Ave., while approximately 50 people eagerly awaited its decision.

First, neighbors attacked the hiring and financial practices of On Your Mark, the West Brighton-based human services agency that plans to house seven developmentally disabled adults in the two-family home.

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.

Maintaining they "are concerned for the occupants," residents were armed with a 1997-1998 audit from the state comptroller questioning if the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office and Island voluntary agencies — including On Your Mark — were maintaining adequate control over their clients' cash, and whether the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) is providing appropriate oversight of the respective agencies' management of such money.

After the meeting, Eugene Spatz, executive director of On Your Mark, said that was a logistical problem that has been corrected with direct deposit, but



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Monsignor John Servodidio, pastor of St. Joseph's R.C. Church, Rosebank, says of the proposed community residence in Huguenot: "These are our brothers and sisters, they are not animals."

that there was never an issue of missing money.

Joshua Gutterman, president of the Elmwood and Tree Top Homeowners Association and a special education teacher for the Board of Education, accused the agency of hiring an employee who had a criminal record for a drug charge, and a suspended license.

"I love these children and want to make sure they are in an appropriate setting," he said.

But Spatz wasn't familiar with who Gutterman was referring to, and said the record of On Your Mark should speak for itself.

Board member Bonnie Bibula said she has an On Your Mark community residence near her Armstrong Avenue home that she once opposed. "I'm glad it went in because it is the best-kept house on the block."

Residents also presented an alternative location at 67 Lenevar Ave., which is around the corner from the proposed site. It is an area they suggest has fewer homes and is safer.

"It is comparable, if not a better home," said Terry Papineau.

The Stafford Avenue home is next to a garden center and borders Foster Road, a dangerous street busy with traffic, according to residents.

"This is a great house and the parents confirmed that," Spatz said of the Stafford Avenue site. "We are always concerned about safety, but not with this site more than usual," he said.

"I trust everyone, including On Your Mark, but I want to verify things," explained George T. Hartigan, a Prince's Bay Democrat who recently announced his candidacy for state Assembly in the 61st District in front of the controversial End Place home for the disabled.

Stafford Avenue is the first community residence the board has voted on since it unanimously rejected the End Place home in Greenridge in March. The decision was highly criticized and OMRDD overrode it after a hearing.

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 disabled: Accept the site, suggest an alternative or object to the site on grounds that the neighborhood is already saturated with similar residences.

The community board's vote is merely advisory.

Earlier this month, the Human Resources Committee unanimously recommended the board approve the Stafford Avenue home at a heated meeting between angry residents who were opposed and elected officials and clergy who support the proposal.

A few weeks prior to that meeting, a fistfight erupted between the current homeowner, who said she has also received threatening calls, and a neighbor.

Last night's meeting was markedly quieter and less emotional than recent gatherings to discuss the homes, although the lines were clearly drawn.

"People came here as a pack of wolves ready to destroy, not get information," Monsignor John Servodidio, pastor of St. Joseph's R.C. Church, Rosebank, said last night, referring to the previous hearing. But he found himself defending the disabled again.

"These are our brothers and sisters, they are not animals. If they lose their rights, yours are in jeopardy too," explained Monsignor Servodidio, urging residents to embrace their new neighbors.

"I was brought up that you take care of your own. If we don't, who will?" asked Dee Vandenburg, a Huguenot resident and area chairwoman for the Staten Island Taxpayers' Association.

Meanwhile, the board was faced with another weighty decision, and rejected an application for a variance to build a Walgreens on Richmond Avenue, an area surrounded by schools in a residentially zoned area.

Currently, the spot is occupied by Sweetbrook Nursery and Garden Center, which plans to relocate nearby.

Eltingville residents stormed a Land Use Committee meeting in the board's Rossville office last week to vehemently oppose the planned drugstore.

Area residents were worried about the hundreds of schoolchildren who will travel through the area (PS 42 is across the street and Eltingville Lutheran School is in back of the site); the increased traffic and lower property values, and the disruption of wildlife in Sweetbrook Creek, which abuts the rear of the garden center.

The board's decision is a recommendation to the Board of Standards and Appeals, which ultimately has authority to grant the variance.

Finally, the board passed a downzoning application for 234 acres in Annadale. Formerly R-3-2, allowing for townhomes, the new zoning is R-3-X, allowing for only detached homes on 40-by-100-foot lots, which describes 93 percent of the homes in the area.

It is the third downzoning application from the borough president's office.

The board will meet again in September.

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