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News

Staten Island Advance

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Residence plans draw familiar fire

Community Board 1 committee votes in favor of 3 proposals despite opposition from neighbors

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In what seemed a replay of debates held earlier this year, New Brighton residents last night came out in force to voice their opposition to a community residence for people with developmental disabilities.

More than 100 people attended a meeting in All Saints' Episcopal Church, Willowbrook, where Community Board 1's St. George and Westerleigh area committees and its human resources committee voted in favor of three separate community residence proposals.

The residences include one to be run by Community Resources for the Developmentally Disabled for five elderly developmentally disabled adults at 17 Sommers Lane, Castleton Corners; one run by United Cerebral Palsy for four adults with mild mental retardation at 156 Watchogue Rd., Westerleigh, and one run by On Your Mark for six adults with autism at 275 Lafayette Ave., New Brighton.

The Lafayette Avenue home generated the most opposition.

The committee votes will go to the board's steering committee, and then to the full board when it meets Sept. 12. But the board votes are merely advisory; ultimately, approval of the homes is up to the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

The tone of the meeting was similar to several Board 1 meetings earlier this year, when social service agencies discussed their state-funded facilities with the board and the public, and faced relentless interruptions and questioning from audience members.

Like other North Shore residents who discussed the topic earlier this year, some speakers at last night's meeting complained there were simply too many residences in their neighborhoods, and that it was time for other areas on Staten Island to accept some.

Joe Carroll, district manager of Board 1, discussed the Padavan Law, which allows community boards three options when faced with a proposed site for a community residence for the developmentally disabled: 1. Accept the proposed

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site. 2. Suggest alternative sites. 3. Object on the grounds of saturation, meaning the proposed site is within a neighborhood that already has too many similar residences.

New Brighton residents Michael McGregor, Lindy Crescitelli and Janet Cinramello all said they support community residences, but feel other neighborhoods should take them.

Rosemarie Lohr, of New Brighton, read from a list of figures she said she received from Borough Hall, which said there are 68 community residences in Board 1, while there are 31 in Board 2 and 26 in Board 3.

"Is that fair share? No way," she said. "We're not opposed to helping people, but we want Community Board 2 and Community Board 3 to give their fair share."

Tom LaManna, chief of staff for Councilman Jerome X. O'Donovan (D-North Shore), read a statement from the councilman in favor of the residence on Lafayette Avenue.

"The only negative for the community I see is the adverse publicity that is generated by meetings such as this, which unfortunately feed into the misconceptions among some people," O'Donovan wrote.

The Watchogue Road residence got some support from Valerie Michetti, of St. John Avenue, who said her sister is mildly retarded.

"No one needs to tell me about bad manners," said Ms. Michetti about the people she and sister grew up with, who, she said, behaved much worse than developmentally disabled people.

George Smith, of Clyde Place, said he approved of the Lafayette Avenue site, and said "it's fear, ignorance and bigotry" that makes people want to keep developmentally disabled people out of a community.

Many audience members cried "No" after Smith said this, and again insisted that New Brighton residents accept community residences, but feel they should be in other parts of Staten Island as well.

Dan Rieu, a Westerleigh resident who said he was on the board for 16 years, said he was disappointed in the board because it did not listen enough to the community before taking a vote.

"[Carroll] gets up and says the group home is here, and that's it. They should be taking information," Rieu said after the meeting.

"The Padavan Law should have teeth in it," according to Lindy Crescitelli, president of the New Brighton Citizens' Committee and a son of the man who spoke earlier, who said the state law should have a stronger definition of what saturation is.

"We laid it out for them," said Carroll, referring to his description of the Padavan Law. "To say you don't have options is a great disservice."