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Finally: Disabled welcomed

Residences proposed for Charleston and Oakwood go before Community Board 3 tonight with some community backing

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After a year of fighting to boot community residences for the developmentally disabled off the block, some South Shore residents are now rolling out the welcome mat.

The Manhattan-based United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) is proposing two residences -- at 31 Englewood Ave., Charleston, and 102 Champlain Ave., Oakwood.

Each home will have four residents, two men and two women, in the mild to moderate range of mental retardation and cerebral palsy. The residents of the Charleston site will range in age from 11 to 23. Residents of the Oakwood site will be in their 20s and 30s.

The Charleston Civic Association has already sent a letter of support to UCP.

"It is a lot better than Willowbrook and the community may benefit from it," said Pat Walker, president of the group.

Borough President Guy Molinari, a strong advocate for such homes, sent a letter to the civic association praising its initiative.

"It is refreshing to see that we have some civic leaders and community residents who will not turn their backs on Staten Islanders who have physical problems not of their own doing and will benefit from decent housing accommodations with professional help," the letter read.

Some people notified by UCP said they have no problems with the proposal as long as the homes are physically consistent with the neighborhood.

"We don't want an eyesore," said John LaFemina, president of the Oakwood Civic Association. He said he

INSIDE
News:

- » [Daily Poll](#)
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- » [Opinions/Editorials](#)
- » [NewsFlash](#)
- » [Weather](#)
- » [Lottery Results](#)
- » [SI 2000](#)
- » [The Traffic Mess](#)
- » [Forum](#)

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- ▶ [Cams+Radio](#)
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- ▶ [Sports](#)
- ▶ [Business](#)
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hasn't received feedback from the community but acknowledged the developmentally disabled wouldn't disrupt the block or create a dangerous situation if they are carefully supervised.

"We need to take care of our own," LaFemina added.

All the residents are from Staten Island and half are from the South Shore. Residents will have 24-hour supervision. During the day, they will be transported to a day program and will return to a fully staffed home in the evening.

Both are small homes in the middle of quiet blocks without many children and near major intersections. The Englewood Avenue site corners Arthur Kill Road and the Champlain Avenue home abuts Hylan Boulevard.

Englewood Avenue residents said ambulances often have difficulty finding the dead-end street because it appears as a continuous road on maps. The West Shore Expressway splits the street.

But neighbors say it is a safe, ethnically diverse block—within walking distance of a small grocery store and buses.

UCP said the towns were chosen because of their residential settings. "We wanted a small environment that is more conducive to having privacy," said Linda Laul, assistant executive director of UCP.

Ms. Laul said she has been to the site several times to communicate with neighbors, many of whom quizzed her about plans. "We make every effort to work with the community. We want them to accept what we are considering," she said.

Most of the residents need professional assistance at home and require care that can be difficult for their families to provide. Although there is a UCP program in the Bronx that offers weeklong breaks, parents sought a permanent, nearby home.

"This is something that I think she needs. Being with other people her own age and having access to activities. But I want her to be close enough that we can still be a part of her life," said Linda Aponte of West Brighton, whose 23-year-old daughter, Erin, will move into the Charleston home.

Describing the process of finding a home as long and frustrating, Mrs. Aponte said the family has been on a list for almost five years.

The process is part of the New York State Creating Alternatives in Residential Environments and Services (NYS CARES), a plan pushed by Gov. George Pataki to eliminate the waiting list in New York for residential placement and services.

While the facility is state-funded, families have a hand in selecting sites for their children.

Although her daughter can't speak, Mrs. Aponte is thrilled that Erin is a step closer to independence.

"It is a natural progression. My other children have grown and moved away," she said.

She is also confident that the community will embrace her daughter and the home will enhance the neighborhood.

Community Board 3, which has become a center for debates over the siting of residential facilities for the disabled this year, has received no complaints about the new proposed homes.

Earlier this year, Huguenot and Greenridge residents stormed the board's Rossville headquarters to oppose similar homes proposed for their towns. The heated meetings gained the attention of politicians and community activists, who argued that the developmentally disabled make good neighbors and that it is a community's responsibility to house them.

Members of Board 3 are pleased at the lack of opposition to the latest South Shore homes, particularly since they have little choice but to approve the plans.

The Community Residence Site Selection Law -- also known as the Padavan 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.

The board's vote is merely advisory. If the board rejected the site, the state would hold a hearing on the board's objections but would ultimately have the power to approve the site.

The board is set to review the applications at a public hearing tonight at 7:30 in its offices at 655-218 Rossville Ave.

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