

Page #1



ADVANCE PHOTOS ■ JOSHUA CARP

Michael Pignataro, a representative of the state's Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, talks to the audience.

2 communities, 2 views on 1 need

■ Charleston disabled residence plan is endorsed, but Oakwood proposal is challenged by neighbors worried about staffing and property values

By KATHLEEN LUCADAMO
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER



Isabel Cifone of Oakwood voices her objection to the residence proposed near her home on Champlain Avenue.

Faded
OR
mm
9/25

The Human Resources Committee of Community Board 3 recommended two community residences for the developmentally disabled last night — one with the community's blessing, and the other after angry outbursts.

Gathered in the board's Rossville headquarters, the committee heard Manhattan-based United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) introduce proposals for a home at 31 Englewood Ave., Charleston, and 102 Champlain Ave., Oakwood.

Both sites will have four residents, in the mild to moderate range of mental retardation and cerebral palsy. The Charleston ranch cornering Arthur Kill Road will have two men and two women, ages 11 to 23. Three women and one man will live in the Oakwood ranch off Hylan Boulevard. Three residents are in their 20s and one woman is in her late 40s.

UCP will need to make each house handicapped-accessible.

Residents will attend day programs and will be supervised 4 hours a day. An advisory committee comprised of neighbors and UCP representatives will be established for each home if they are approved by the state.

Board members read a letter from the Charleston Civic Association supporting the Englewood Avenue home, and one from Borough President Guy Molinari praising the group for its support.

"We are glad you are in the district and our office is open to you," said Robin Lucey, a representative of Councilman Stephen Fiala (R-South Shore).

"It was a fine choice. It has a country setting," said board

member Esther Kosa, who lives in Charleston and is a member of the civic association.

The board also embraced the group and offered its services.

"It is not every community, as we know, that would reach out like this. It's not an ordinary thing you've done here," said Angelo Aponte, a former city consumer affairs and state housing commissioner, whose 23-year-old daughter, Erin, will move into the Charleston home.

Discussion of the Oakwood home didn't go quite as smoothly.

"You are pushing me out of my house. I have to worry that a few houses away are rapists. Can you guarantee us nothing will happen?" said Isabel Cifone, a mother of three girls who has lived on Champlain Avenue for 21 years.

There were about 15 people present during the Charleston hearing, but attendance swelled to about 25 when the Oakwood home came up for review.

Oakwood residents were primarily concerned with staff qualifications and property values decreasing.

"I worked for UCP in college. I don't have a problem with the people living in the home. They are lovable people. But these things we are worried about," said Marc Berger of Oakwood, a special-education teacher, who was referring to concerns about staff and real-estate values.

Residents asked if the staff is drug-tested or fingerprinted. The agency is not required by law to drug-test, and fingerprinting is only required for staffers who work with children.

They also asked if the house could be sold and have another use.

"It can go to an agency doing the same work, but it can't be used for substance abuse or an AIDS clinic. I guarantee you that can't happen," said William D'Ambrosio, chairman of Human Resources Committee.

UCP representatives explained the agency has been operating for 50 years and has no plans to go out of business.

"I find it more offensive when people move into my neighborhood and convert their house into apartments or don't mow the lawn for five years," said Linda Agello of Prince's Bay, whose 6-year-old daughter Megan has cerebral palsy. However, she admitted she would prefer the staff be drug-tested if her daughter lived in the home.

All residents of the proposed homes are from Staten Island, and about half are from the South Shore. Both homes are near bus stops, which was a priority for Francine Balk of Eltingville. Her 25-year-old stepdaughter, Erika, who is travel-trained, will be living in the Oakwood home.

"She will be able to use the bus to visit family," said Ms. Balk.

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

St. Advance
9-22-00

She told the group that Erika is an asset to the community and has volunteered at the South Shore YMCA and the CYO program at Mount Loretto.

Erika, who is deaf, is excited about the home because it is near St. Charles R.C. Church, which has mass in sign language.

"Sometimes it is fear of the unknown that leads them to oppose the homes," Ms. Balk said before the meeting.

Whether residents supported or rejected UCP proposals, they have little influence on the decision.

According to the Community Residence Site Selection Law — also known as the Padavan Law — community boards have 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 means other community residences for the developmentally disabled.

The next step is the full board's vote on Tuesday at 7:30 p.m. in PS 25 on the grounds of the Mission of the Immaculate Virgin, Mount Loretto, Pleasant Plains.

This vote is merely advisory and the full board is likely to support the projects. If the board rejects a site, the state would hold a hearing on the board's objections but would ultimately have the power to approve the site.



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ JOSHUA CARP

Officials listen during the South Shore meeting on community residences. From left are Dominick Spada, a member of the Community Board 3 Human Resources Committee; William D'Ambrosio, the committee's chairman; and John Antoniello, chairman of Community Board 3.