

OUR OPINION

The Charleston precedent

When residents of Charleston generously welcomed the opening of a new residence for the developmentally disabled in their community recently, a lot of Staten Islanders took it as an indication that, after years of fear-mongering and tragically laughable rationalizations for opposing such residences, particularly on the South Shore, the tide might finally be turning.

Charleston residents were satisfied that their reasonable concerns had been addressed and embraced the concept at a Community Board 3 hearing. Pat Walker, president of the Charleston Civic Association, said of the home, which is to have four young developmentally disabled residents, "It is a lot better than Willowbrook and the community may benefit from it."

Officials of United Cerebral Palsy, which will operate the group residence, were pleasantly surprised, as was Borough President Guy Molinari, who sent an open letter to the civic association, stating, "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."

That same evening, CB3's Human Resources Committee recommended a second site, in Oakwood, for a similar UCP residence, and the initial reaction at that Sept. 22 was nearly as positive. John LaFemina, president of the Oakwood Civic Association, expressed the concern of his members that the home be consistent with the surrounding community, but acknowledged, "We need to take care of our own."

But immediately after that, despite the shining example of the warm welcome extended by Charleston residents to their new neighbors, fear and ignorance took over the discussion about the Oakwood site. The ugliness culminated in a full Community Board 3 hearing on the issue on Wednesday.

"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?" one mother of three daughters said.

For one thing, no one can guarantee anything about any of their neighbors, developmentally disabled or not, and more than a few Islanders might be surprised at what their "normal," unscreened, neighbors are up to. Utterly baseless dire predictions are not sufficient grounds to deny anyone a residence. And frankly, the problem of gangs of developmentally disabled ruffians preying upon their neighbors ranks right up there with the problem of gangs of little old ladies intimidating passersby on the street.

But that irrational line of thinking hijacked what should have been a civil debate. The ugliness culminated in a full Community Board 3 hearing on the issue on Wednesday when residents became angry when the board approved the Oakwood site. It seems that because the board didn't back down under the pressure and do exactly what the residents wanted — i.e., nix the siting — some residents felt the entire process was corrupt. Some legitimate concerns were raised, such as screening for UCP staffers at the home, but that's a matter of changing the law to enact stricter requirements, something Island lawmakers might lend their efforts to.

The rest of the opposition argument degenerated in a shouted laundry list of the lamest complaints imaginable — such as traffic (as if four non-driving developmentally disabled residents and attending staff members are going to turn a residential street into Times Square and as if a "normal" family in that same site might not have the typical three, four or five cars); such as lack of notification, (even though the community board bent over backward to notify people, and, in any case, the issue was well-publicized in the Advance well before Wednesday's meeting); such as the all-purpose "oversaturation" excuse. This time, clearly desperate opponents cited group homes up to six miles distant. If that's the "oversaturation" standard, the entire metropolitan region is "over-

One resident told the Advance, "It makes me scared and it makes my kids scared. I want my kids to have a happy day and good dreams. My kids are my life and I want them to have an American future. I don't want them to be scared and mess up school. I don't want them to worry they can't go outside."

Another echoed, "Besides having young children on [our street], we also have lots of senior citizens who are afraid to leave their homes for fears they are being watched when they leave."

With all due respect, if you fear the presence of four developmentally disabled and UCP-approved staff members to that extreme degree, that irrational phobia is pretty much your problem to overcome, not the clients' or UCP's or the community board's. The group residence experience all over Staten Island has been generally positive, as those residences' neighbors can attest. Before concocting wildly bizarre "what-if" scenarios, why not find out the facts? Again, the chances are better that you have more to fear from some of your "normal" neighbors than from supervised developmentally disabled residents. For example, someone threw a chair across the room in anger at the end of the meeting Wednesday. Who would you rather have as a neighbor, someone who throws a chair at a public meeting because he didn't get what he wanted, or mildly retarded young people?

Francine Balk, a mother of one of the young people who will live in the Oakwood residence, said; "Sometimes it is fear of the unknown that leads them to oppose the homes." She's being charitable. If this were 20 or 30 years ago, perhaps the "fear of the unknown" defense would apply, but after all we've learned and all the information, including from first-hand experience, that's available, there's no excuse for not knowing any longer. Sometimes, fear comes just from being willfully ignorant.

We commend the residents of Charleston for setting such a fine example and avoiding such a foolish scene and we commend Community Board 3 for being patient with this kind of inane rhetoric, resisting the angry demands and coming down on the right side of the issue. So will the residents in Oakwood some day.