

Group home for autistic kids OK'd by Board 1 committees

By **BILL STEPHENS**
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Community Board 1's human resources and St. George-New Brighton area committees approved a proposed New Brighton group home for autistic youths last night.

The On Your Mark group's proposal for an eight-resident home at 272 Brighton Ave. received a 15-0 vote of approval, although other social service agencies have met stiff board resistance over the timing of their proposals.

The vote marked the board's first social service agency approval since announcing its policy requiring the agencies to notify the board of planned North Shore facilities — or risk automatic opposition to the project.

Board Chairman Joseph Marotta said the On Your Mark proposal passed easily because it demonstrated the home will not alter the community's character

and, importantly, the group approached the board during the planning stages.

"If you follow that policy statement, you really won't have any problem," Marotta said. "We're willing to take our fair share of agencies. The reason our board was upset with other agencies is because they were working behind our backs."

Gene Spatz, On Your Mark's executive director, said he was pleased with the board's approval, and said he didn't expect opposition. "There's a lot of good people down here and we have a terrific community, so I'm not surprised," he said.

His non-profit agency, which currently rents office space in the Jewish Community Center in Tompkinsville, is awaiting the architect's report and appraisal before purchasing the property. The human resources committee will make the final recommendation

on the facility to the full board.

At least two board members — Sheila Brown-Blei and human resource committee chairwoman Florence Semple — tearfully told Spatz that they were ashamed that his organization had to come to the board for approval.

While presenting the home proposal to the board, Spatz emphasized that the patients who would become the home's permanent residents are used to community life, since they're currently residing in Island communities with their parents.

Autistic people have a developmental disability that interferes with their ability to communicate and interact with their environment. They are extremely dependant, requiring constant supervision. Spatz, noting that the average age of the residents is 19, said the home will ease the burden on the youths' families.