

CB 1 residents blast proposed adult group home

By BILL STEPHENS
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About 200 outraged Fort Wadsworth residents opposed a planned Hope Avenue group home for retarded adults during a Community Board 1 committee meeting last night, saying the facility is inappropriate for their neighborhood.

Officials from Independent Living Association, the non-profit group that would run the home, said the residents were misinformed and simply did not understand the program.

Independent Living has proposed a family-style residential home for 11 severely retarded Staten Island men currently living with their parents.

John Welch, the group's executive director, said the home would ease the burden on the retarded men's families since many aging parents are having difficulty caring for their sons.

"There's a lot of care involved. It's a lifelong endeavor," he told the residents and Board 1's Rosebank/Shore Acres/Fort Wadsworth area committee and human resources committee members.

But the emotional residents lashed out at the plan, and no one publicly supported the home in a classic example of the N.I.M.B.Y. — Not in My Back Yard — syndrome.

Many residents said they opposed the 197 Hope Avenue location, not the program itself.

"I see a community that's outraged about the location of this facility," resident Jesse Hecht said. That hostile attitude would be a disservice to the program, so its directors should try to find a suitable place for the home, he argued.

Hecht asked why the group chose Fort Wadsworth over other Island areas and said the home did not belong in the community.

"I wouldn't tell you where you have to live, why should you tell retarded people where to live," Robert Witkowsky, director of the state's Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Service Office, replied.

One Hope Avenue resident shouted obscenities as he blasted the plan. Two residents implied that the retarded men's sexual desires could lead to rapes in the neighborhood. And some said the facility's residents would bring crime to the street and feared for their children's safety.

"I live right across the street from where you're

gonna build this damn home," James Mazurkiewicz shouted before swearing about the plan.

Resident Joan Rotizsch said 10 of the 17 houses on the street belonged to senior citizens, and that they didn't deserve to have a group home put on the block. She also questioned the sexual desires of the retarded men.

Witkowsky said the home's residents constantly would be supervised, and would not be allowed to roam the neighborhood unless accompanied by a staff member.

From 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., the 21- to 40-year-old men would attend classes, workshops and treatment programs, he said.

On weekends and during the evening, the men would participate in recreational activities and trips as other people their age would do, Welch has said.

Other residents said the small lot could not handle the parking and housing requirements and one man accused Welch and a state official of lying about on-site parking and who would use the home.

One resident, who refused to give his correct name, accused Welch and Witkowsky of misleading the community about the proposal.

He feared they would place criminals in the home, and was insulted that Independent Living plans to demolish the vacant house presently on the site. The group will construct a new building on the property.

"We're against the lies they've started, Charlie (Langere)," he told the board member.

Witkowsky said Independent Living could not modify the plans once they receive state approval.

After the meeting, Witkowsky said, "They're really misinformed about what we're trying to do and who we're trying to help." About 150 severely retarded Islanders need placement in such facilities, he added.

Welch invited residents to tour one of Independent Living's four Brooklyn group homes. Residents would find the homes are well-supervised and that neighbors support the facilities, he said.

The area committee — despite board members' support of the concept before the meeting — will recommend that the full board reject the proposal.

Borough President Ralph J. Lamberti and City Councilman Jerome X. O'Donovan attended the meeting, but did not address the group home proposal.