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Residents object to proposed group home

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An association hoping to set up a group home for mentally retarded adults has offered a Westleigh homeowner \$340,000.

John Welch, executive director of Independent Living Association, yesterday confirmed that his agency made the offer for the house at 183 S. Greenleaf Ave.

He said that although the 5-bedroom house has not been for-

mally selected as a site, he hopes to go to contract by October.

Welch said the house, which stands on a half-acre plot set back from the street, would require only minor alterations, such as the addition of fire alarms. He hopes to obtain state approvals and funds in a few months and place clients there in April of next year.

The house would be home to 8 to 10 retarded people ages 25 to 45,

all from Staten Island. Unlike facilities that are transitory residences for retarded people progressing toward independent living, the site would be "home for life" for those located there, he said.

"These people are not capable of doing most things for themselves. They need assistance with grooming and preparing meals," he said, indicating most have the

intellectual capacity of a 3-year old.

Some live with parents who are aging beyond the point where they can care for the retarded person.

The Independent Living Association plans to open another group home on Hope Avenue, Fort Wadsworth, in October.

Welch said the developmentally disabled are "very trusting, very

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benign," and stressed that they are not dangerous.

They will be supervised 24 hours a day, seven days a week, including a team of 5 staffers during the day and two overnight.

One elderly resident said she was concerned that the clients "would wander around the community. I fear for the young kids."

But Welch said that the clients would be transported by van in the morning to a school and return about 5 p.m. Afterwards, they would not be allowed off the site.

Like many area residents, Ed Finnin learned about the sale from an anonymous flier distributed in mailboxes. It stated: "Are you aware what is going on in our back yard?"

Finnin said he opposes the plan because he believes the facility would change the neighborhood and reduce the value of his property.

"I bought a house in this neighborhood 20 years ago because I knew it was established. I knew what was here," he said. "I have nothing against the retarded, but the biggest investment of my life is going to be depreciated."

Concern extended to the staffing of the home.

"You remember Willowbrook (Staten Island Developmental Center), and what the staff was like there," said one woman, recalling the facility's reputation for patient abuse. "We don't want people like that here."

Welch said staffers are carefully selected and trained.

Many residents said they were not concerned with any safety threat from the clients, but rather an economic threat from the placing of a group home in their area.

But safety concerns were present.

"They say these people have the capacity of a 3-year-old," said one

woman. "Well I have a 3-three-year-old. I can handle him, but I'm much bigger than he is."

Staff at Community Board 1 said they have received about 25 calls in the past week from concerned residents. District Manager Joseph Carroll said many residents oppose the project, one indicating that the retarded people would be shot if they chose to live there. Some residents were not opposed to the project, he said, and simply called for further information.

Welch insisted that the presence of such a facility has never resulted in reduced property values.

Residents have also attacked the plan because they believe the state will be overpaying for the site. Welch, however, said a real estate consultant was hired to make a fair market appraisal of the site, including comparisons with sales of similarly sized homes.

John Leanza, who has owned the property for 20 years, said several neighbors once friendly to him have turned cold since learning of the prospective sale. He said while he understands the neighborhood concern, he believes these retarded adults are "loving and innocent people who will make good neighbors."

Although the agency hopes to sign a contract by October, the sale must be approved by the state. State law requires that the local community board be notified and have the opportunity to hold public hearing.

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