

Providers wonder if secession might abandon the needy

By **ROBERT V. WOLF**
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Some local social service providers see secession as an opportunity to improve their agency's work, but others worry that important programs might be ignored if the Island sets off on its own.

The secession issue raised numerous questions for the 12 representatives from local social service groups participating in a focus group interview at the Advance last night.

The panelists, whose groups often depend on city funding and serve diverse clients — from pregnant teens to the mentally ill — did not reach agreement about whether secession would jeopardize or enhance funding for local social services.

Despite the doubts of about half the room, all but one of the participants, who declined to express her view, said they favored a yes vote in the Nov. 6 referendum,

which, if it passes, would create a commission to propose a charter for a new city.

Most viewed the fall vote as a non-committal first-step to explore secession, support for which could be withdrawn when Islanders go to the polls four years later to vote on the proposed charter.

Of primary concern to several who participated in the group discussion, which was moderated by Advance Editor Les Trautmann, was that their clients not get lost in the shuffle to forge a new city.

"If you're setting up a new city, there's going to have to be a lot of emphasis on infrastructure, things which the general population thinks our city has let them down on like sewers on the South Shore and public transportation, and I think that social services would get short shrift," said Rona Solomon, director of the Center for HIV Education Services, a

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ADVANCE PHOTO/MIKE FALCO

Social service providers listen to a discussion on secession at the Advance.

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division of the Staten Island AIDS Task Force.

Ann Deinhardt, director of the Society for Seamen's Children, which runs foster-care, day-care and teen counseling programs, said Staten Island appeared to have less demand for social services than the rest of the city. "That can lead to denial that the problems exist," she said.

"I really think the people of Staten Island are Garboesque: They want to be left alone," added Jack Schierenbeck of Camelot Counseling Centers, a substance-abuse treatment clinic. "We, around this table, represent pariah groups. I'm sure with secession we'd have less congestion at motor vehicles. We may have better public transportation. But I doubt we'll have better drug treatment or homeless shelters or deal with problems like this with a generous hand," he said.

"Most people came to Staten Island to get away from these problems," he added.

But others, echoing the widespread complaint that Island needs have historically taken a back seat to the needs of the four more populated boroughs, said local social services could fare better if Staten Island stood on its own.

"When you're 400,000 people out of 7 million (people), they don't see you. Our problems are overshadowed by the size of (New York City)," said Thomas Tierney, deputy administrator for the Staten Island Alliance for the Mentally Ill.

Tom Naples, president of the Alliance, speculated that an independent Staten Island would have more money to burn. "We give a lot of money (to the city), but the percentage coming back is not proportionate," he said.

Jane Ernst, deputy executive director of the Mission of the Immaculate Virgin, Mount Loretto, said she felt that a new city would allow local service groups to set a new agenda.

"I really think that it's an opportunity, if Staten Island seizes it, to do some very special things," said Ms. Ernst, an Island native who now lives in New Jersey.

But others said the city offers certain advantages. Kenneth Popler, executive director of the Staten Island Mental Health Society, which gets half its funds from the city and half from the state, said New York City provided a national model for the delivery of social services.

Staten Island would lose the city's expertise, he said, if secession is ultimately approved.

Among facilities the Island currently lacks but could build if it sets off on its own, said some panelists, were a city hospital, a walk-in medical clinic for children under 12 and an acute-care facility for children needing psychiatric care.

Jo Kelly, executive director of the Staten Island Teen Pregnancy Network, said the Island also

lacked adequate youth services.

"In the summer, they're in the Midland Beach parking lot getting pregnant," in part, because they have nothing else to do, she said.

Ms. Kelly cited teen pregnancy as an example of a pervasive but often invisible problem.

"I think many Staten Islanders do not like to recognize we have real problems. Perhaps those needs will not be recognized, and therefore not supported (under secession)," she said.

At issue for some was the basic character of Islanders: Would they want to spend their tax dollars on services for pregnant teens, building homeless shelters, counseling people with AIDS and housing the mentally ill? Among those who doubted Islanders would give such services a high priority were Schierenbeck and the Rev. Terry Troia, executive director of Project Hospitality, which runs services for the hungry and homeless.

Schierenbeck, citing vocal community opposition to two of Camelot's facilities, said the "not-in-my-back yard" attitude did not bode well for agencies like his in a City of Staten Island.

And Ms. Troia worried that

funds could dry up for what she called essential, but unpopular, causes:

"Where's the political power to push for the funding? I don't see anybody out there ... yelling that we need more mental health beds ... I don't see communities gathering thousands at a clip saying we need residential treatment centers on Staten Island."

But Popler said "Staten Islanders are not any more afflicted with the Not In My Back Yard Syndrome ... We find Staten Islanders supportive of mental health issues compared to other areas."

Added Naples: "People care here because they have a small-

town attitude."

All but Ms. Troia, who declined comment, and Jane Ernst, who can't vote here because she lives in New Jersey, said they would vote yes in November. But those interviewed last night said they would reserve final judgement until the charter commission releases its results.

Arlene Koeppel, president of the Community Agency for Senior Citizens, seemed to speak for the entire group when she said: "I would vote yes, obviously with the option to be able to say no later. My major concern is that social services is funded ..."

Advance reporter Carl Campanile contributed to this story.

Steps to Secession

Before November 6, 1990
Staten Island is a borough of the
City of New York governed by New York City

Election Day -- November 6, 1990
Referendum on Staten Island Self-Governance (Secession)

If you vote YES

A study of Staten Island self-governance will begin.

If you vote NO

No study of Staten Island self-governance will take place with the possibility of an independent Staten Island ended.

Approximately 3 years later after studies and public hearings, a new charter will be written and two questions will be submitted for vote:

- 1.) Do you want to approve the new charter and secede?
- 2.) Do you reject the new charter but wish to keep studying secession?

If you vote NO

on the charter, but **YES** to continue the study, another charter will be presented for a vote in six months.

If you then vote YES

on the charter Staten Island would become the City of Staten Island, if approved by the State Legislature and Governor.

If you vote NO

Staten Island remains part of the City of New York.

Secession



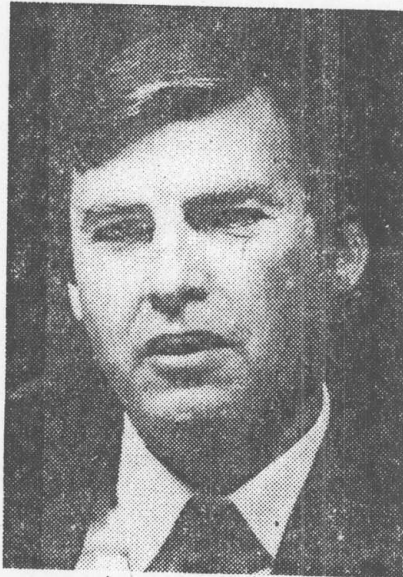
Rev. Terry Troia, director, Project Hospitality, on a potential secession: "What makes us think when we secede, that all of a sudden we're going to be totally concerned about the people in Park Hill



Kenneth Popler, executive director, S.I. Mental Health Society: "I don't think Staten Islanders are any more afflicted with the Not In My Backyard Syndrome . . . We find Staten Islanders supportive of mental health issues compared to other areas."



Rona Solomon, director, S.I. AIDS Task Force: "If Staten Island were a separate city, it would have the second highest number of people with AIDS in any city in New York. Buffalo doesn't offer these services, and we have twice as many people with AIDS in Staten Island than there are in Buffalo

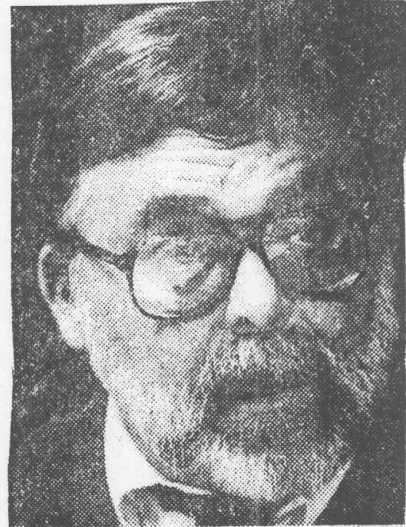


Thomas Tierney, deputy director, S.I. Developmental Disabilities Services Office: "When you're 400,000 people out of 7 million (people), they don't see you. Our problems are overshadowed by the size of (New York City)."

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Jane Ernst, deputy executive director, Mount Loretto: "I think that if we don't do this (vote yes in the referendum), we're missing the boat."



Robert Witkowski, director, S.I. Developmental Disabilities Office: "I don't honestly know if anyone is in tune (on the secession issue) until we get all the information . . ."



Dorothy Doran, executive director, S.I. Center for Independent Living: "I feel that Staten Island has been self sufficient in the past, but we've lost a lot of that self sufficiency. I think we can regain it and have a better island."



Jo Kelly, executive director, S.I. Teen Pregnancy Network: "I think many Staten Islanders do not like to recognize we have real problems (teen pregnancy, AIDS, etc.) Perhaps those needs will not be recognized, and therefore not supported (under secession)."

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Jack Schierenbeck, representative, Camelot Counseling Centers: "Will (Staten Island under secession) have more sympathy in its heart and money in its budget (for social services)? Let's get serious. There isn't a chance."



Ann Deinhardt, executive director, Society for Seamen's Children: "I wonder if Staten Island as a separate entity would see the priority of some of those (social) services."



Arlene Koeppl, president, Community Agency for Senior Citizens: "I would vote yes, obviously with the option to be able to say no later. My major concern is that social services is funded . . ."



Tom Naples, president, S.I. Alliance for the Mentally Ill: "You think everything is going to collapse with Staten Island seceding? I think things will get better with Staten Island seceding."

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Advance Editor Les Trautmann, right, and reporter Carl Campanile listen to a point during the discussion.

Public forum tonight

BY ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

If you want to learn more about secession and what the Nov. 6 vote will mean, be at PS 29 tonight for a forum sponsored by the Staten Island Advance and governor's office.

A panel of state experts will be on hand to discuss the topic and field questions from the audience.

The forum will be from 7:30 to 9 p.m. in PS 29, Victory Boulevard and Slosson Avenue, Castleton Corners.

The panel consists of former city Consumer Affairs Com-

missioner Angelo Aponte; Alan C. Marin, special labor counsel to the speaker of the Assembly; Frank Mauro, a former staff member of the city Charter Revision Commission and now deputy director of the Rockefeller Institute; and Evan Davis, counsel to Gov. Mario Cuomo. Davis will act as moderator.

Anyone who wishes to question the panel is requested to register at the auditorium entrance and submit their question to avoid duplication.

What: Public secession forum
Where: PS 29, Victory Blvd. and Slosson Ave.
When: Tonight, 7:30-9 p.m.

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Social service providers and Advance editors gather around a conference table at the paper's offices in Grasmere.

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