

City can't take over state-run group homes

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Islanders concerned that group homes for the mentally retarded could in the future become city homeless shelters are probably unaware of a state law that prohibits such transfers.

A section of the state Public and Law specifically prevents the state Office of Mental Health and Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) from transferring land used for a group home to any other government agency without putting the land up for public sale. Robert Byrne, OMRDD director of public affairs, confirmed that under the 1983 law, the city could acquire such land only through public auction, just like anyone else who might want to buy the property.

Concern about what happens to land once the state acquires it for a group home is common, according to Kathy Kennedy-Shields, director of planning and development for the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Service Office (SIDDSO), the local branch of OMRDD. She said questions concerning the issue are usually raised at community hearings about new group homes.

SIDDSO has plans to open 20 new group homes on Staten Island — 10 each in Community Boards 2 and 3 — by the end of 1992. These sites are in various stages of

Members of Staten Island's three community boards have launched a joint panel to develop a plan to house the city's homeless. Details on Page A 13.

development, some already are approved and being built, others have not yet been proposed.

The 20 homes would house about 200 people, all but five of whom currently live or have families on Staten Island. There is a possibility, according to Robert Witkowski, SIDDSO director, that five people from the Manhattan Developmental Center might move into Island group homes. Should those people choose not to move to the Island, those five beds would be opened to Islanders.

Among the 20 sites is 770-772 Drumgoole Road West in Annadale. Community Board 3, reacting to fierce neighborhood opposition, recently voted to oppose this site, slated to become a home for 10 developmentally disabled adults.

Alfred Bummé, chairman of Board 3, said fear of city and state agencies transferring land is one of the major concerns expressed to the board.

"I think the biggest problem is that people are getting group homes and homeless shelters confused," Bummé said. "Obviously they're concerned with the clientele and how it's going to affect

them personally. People are afraid of living next door to criminals."

Nanette Splendorio of Greenridge, one of those who protested the Drumgoole Road site, said the state law eases her fears, although she is skeptical that the law would be adhered to.

"I just don't trust (Mayor David N.) Dinkins," she said. "He's just done too many things nasty to Staten Island."

She said she is not opposed to developmentally disabled people living in the neighborhood, but is concerned about what could happen in the future.

"My biggest fear is that the city could get to it," Mrs. Splendorio said. "I'm not sure if I still trust the state, but at least we have something to lean on if the state decides to change their mind."

Pat Latula, president of the Annadale Civic Association, said the state law does not erase her concerns.

"What's to say that the state is not going to turn around and change the law?" she asked. "There's no guarantee."

Mrs. Latula said she is less concerned about the home being used as a homeless shelter than she is about it being used as a group home for a population other

than the retarded, such as juvenile delinquents or drug addicts.

"It's not a question of the mentally not wanting the mentally retarded," she said.

The civic association's opposition is also based on the belief that Drumgoole Road, which is the main access road for the Richmond Parkway, is too busy for a group home.

Because the community board rejected the Drumgoole Road site, OMRDD will hold a hearing to determine if a group home should be opened there. The hearing date has not been scheduled, Ms. Kennedy-Shields said.