

Group home dilemma

Public fear persists despite studies that show property values don't decrease

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Despite scores of studies concluding that group homes have no impact on property values and the experience of real estate experts which support those conclusions, the public fear that a home will hurt them persists. It surfaced on Staten Island last month at a community board hearing.

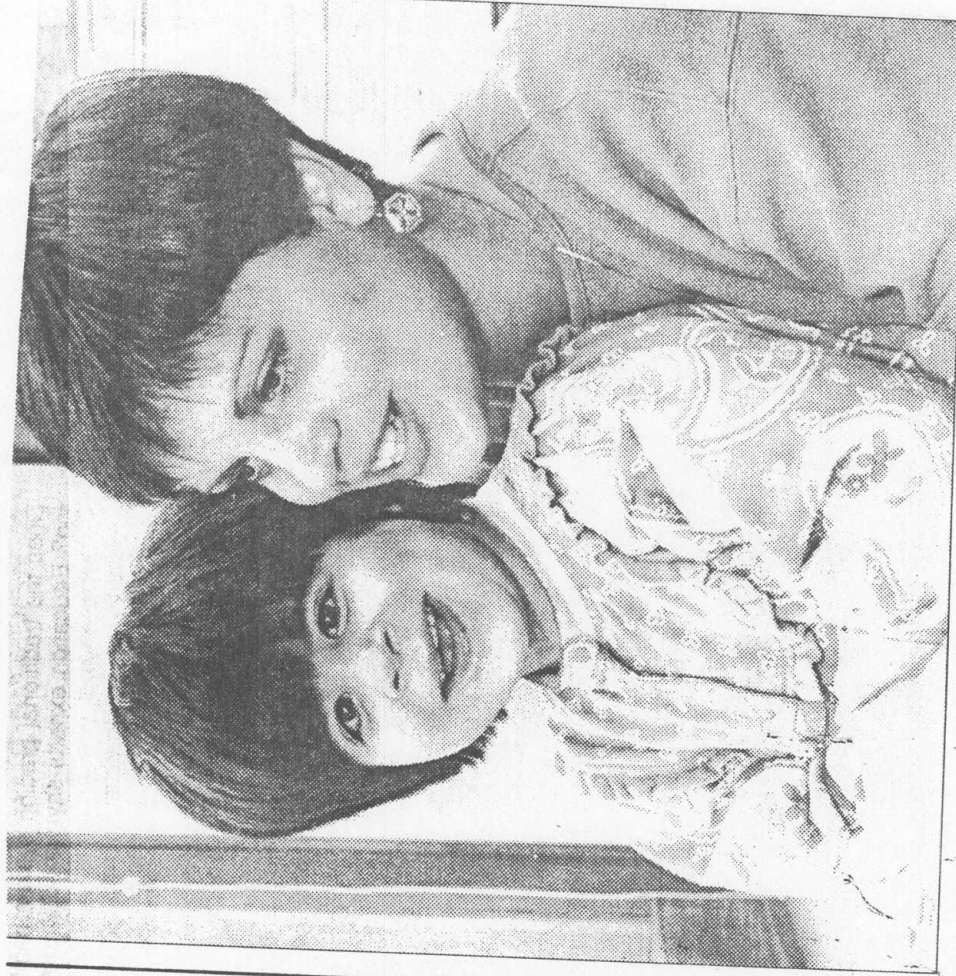
Group homes for developmentally disabled people of all ages are scattered throughout Staten Island, from exclusive blocks such as Diana Trail on Emerson Hill, to the end of Amboy Road in Tottenville and throughout the

North Shore. There is no evidence that the real estate market in these neighborhoods has suffered.

Still, the fallacy persists, even after more than a dozen years of experience with the siting of group homes: in all types of neighborhoods and the findings of real estate experts who consistently say property values remain unaffected.

Last month, residents of Great Kills, at a public hearing of a committee of Community Board 3, cited the property-value issue as justification to oppose a group home for eight developmentally

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ADVANCE PHOTO/IRVING SILVERSTEIN
Elizabeth Caminiti sits in her mother Anne Marie's lap in their Great Kills home. Mrs. Caminiti's bitterness toward opposition on the siting of group homes is detailed below.

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Dilemma

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disabled adults and a hospital-run alcohol rehabilitation center.

A Staten Island real estate appraiser, Henry Salmon of Equity Valuation Associates, Castleton Corners, said the presence of such facilities has no impact on surrounding property values. He went on to suggest that some of these homes can also have a positive impact.

"They tend to become invisible. But the way the newer ones have been put together, they sometimes are better than a 'regular' neighbor because of the way they are maintained and fit in with the community."

He said in the last three years, his firm has appraised "several group homes and many houses near group homes" in Tottenville, Huguenot and Princes Bay. "If they affect value," he added, "I, as an appraiser, would be aware of it."

John Paul Mouner, an appraiser with offices in West Brighton, said a group home had been proposed for the street where his own home is located. "I was pushing for it," he said. Mouner speculated that a cluster of three or more facilities probably would have a negative impact, but one in a neighborhood "shouldn't and doesn't."

Lydia Ragucci, vice president for government affairs of the Staten Island Board of Realtors, said despite the raucous protest of homeowners at a Community Board 3 public hearing on the Great Kills group home a few

weeks ago, she sees evidence that South Shore residents are coming to accept group homes.

Mrs. Ragucci, a Great Kills Realtor, said her experience as a broker and as a Board 3 member has convinced her that group homes, especially those for the developmentally disabled, have no impact on real estate prices. At the full board meeting on the Great Kills group home proposal, only one speaker expressed opposition, she noted.

"I've never found selling a house in a neighborhood with a group home to be a problem," she said. "A facility for young people with drug or alcohol problems might be a tougher sell but I haven't had experience with that."

Evidence of the absence of any impact is in actual sales. As examples of recent transactions, a house diagonally across the street from a residence operated by the Association for the Help of Retarded Children in Port Richmond sold for \$195,000 and a unit opposite a home run by the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office in Great Kills fetched \$152,000. In each instance, the prices appeared to be in line with the current real estate market, according to brokers familiar with these areas.

William DiBiasi, chief executive officer of the Building Industry Association of New York City, dismissed opposition to group homes as evidence that there are "always mean-spirited people around."

"The way they [group homes] are professionally maintained," DiBiasi said, "I see them as a plus."

Princeton University's school of public affairs conducted extended studies of the impact of community residences for the mentally retarded on property values in New York state in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One study focused on 42 group homes in 10 cities and selected 42 neighborhoods without group homes for comparison.

Sales were recorded for a year after establishment of the group homes so that turnover rates could be analyzed. The findings were that increases and decreases

in market prices were the same in the communities with group homes and the matched control communities. The study found that proximity to a group home "did not significantly affect property values" and establishment of the homes "did not generate a higher degree of neighborhood property turnover."

Four years later, investigators analyzed market prices and turnover rates for properties around 32 of the original 42 group homes in eight of the original 10 communities. Again a set of matched control sites were established.

The findings were the same. To condense them: "Over the five-year period following establishment of the group homes, no disruption occurred in real estate trends."

A study in Ottawa, Canada, produced similar results even when the study included group homes for ex-offenders and former drug addicts.

In Illinois, a gubernatorial panel tracked 2,261 residential sales in the immediate neighborhoods of 14 group homes for the developmentally disabled and 14 control neighborhoods. Homes were selected from high-density urban neighborhoods, suburban

communities and rural towns. This study, conducted in 1986, also analyzed criminal activity among residents of group homes.

Not only did the panel find that group homes had no effect on values or neighborhood stability, it concluded that the "crime rate for persons with developmental disabilities who live in Illinois group homes is substantially lower than the crime rate for the general Illinois population."

Studies conducted nationwide, in the Northeast, Midwest, South and on the West Coast have all drawn the same conclusions.

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