

Traffic near group home site debated

By JOHN REEL
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

A meeting last night about a proposed group home in Oakwood for the developmentally disabled turned into a meeting about dangerous traffic conditions instead.

Susan Vattiat, who lives two houses away from the home proposed for 1832 S. Railroad Ave., showed a tape of an elderly man lying in the road after being hit by a car Monday.

"I have a master's degree in education, my specialty was learning and reading disabilities, and I volunteered with the developmentally disabled at Willowbrook," said Mrs. Vattiat. "I also have a cousin who would fit the criteria for this home. He would not be safe walking these streets."

News of tragic accidents, high curbs, askew crosswalks, and motorists speeding and blowing traffic lights are something for a group home to deal with rather than run away from, said representatives of United Cerebral Palsy (UCP), who presented their proposal to the Community Board 3 Human Resources Committee at an open meeting at board headquarters, Rossville.

"A lot of these things should be addressed, but at a different meeting," said Jacqueline Rumolo, director of community affairs and support services for UCP.

Duane Schielke, associate executive director of UCP of New York state, said the eight "profoundly retarded" but ambulatory adult male group home residents would be constantly supervised by a staff of nine full-time and two part-time workers.

At least two aides would attend the residents at all times, he said.

As far as danger from reckless motorists — the home stands very close to where South Railroad Avenue intersects Guyon Avenue — Schielke said the developmentally disabled, like everyone else, must live with certain day-to-day dangers — what he called "dignity of risk."

He added that he understood residents' questions and concerns, but wondered if often what was expressed as fear for residents was actually fear of residents.

"Why can't it be both?" asked Mrs. Vattiat.

UCP's response occasionally got sarcastic, as when South Railroad Avenue resident Andrew Giustiniani asked how residents of the home would negotiate the high curbs in the area.

"I don't know how you do it, but I usually put the left foot down first," said Schielke.

Board 3 president Dennis Sarlo asked Schielke to answer the questions more "positively."

Residents disagreed strongly with Schielke's claims group homes for the developmentally disabled do not drop property values.

"If I have a house that's worth \$200,000, and you put a group home next door, the house is not going to be worth \$200,000 anymore. I don't care how nicely it's kept up," said Jim Vattiat, Mrs. Vattiat's husband.

The Human Resources Committee agreed to recommend the proposed UCP home to the full board, which meets Tuesday at Staten Island University Hospital, Prince's Bay.

"To be honest I don't like the site. It's too tight and too congested. But that argument is not enough. And the board should consider that UCP does things right," said committee member Bill D'Ambrosio.