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Group Homes: An Alternate Proposal

By Corey Bearak

In light of the recent announcements of plans to site group homes and other similar facilities in northeastern Queens, I wish to share my proposal to improve the opportunity for input and review, and provide accountability in the siting of state-licensed group homes, or community residences.

I propose that the state agency supervising the placement of any home, rather than the Community Board:

- 1) notify affected community members;
- 2) hold a public hearing in the community near the proposed facility;
- 3) provide a 60-day comment period following the public hearing; and
- 4) provide residents the opportunity to propose alternate sites and/or present arguments of oversaturation.

The current law gives local community boards very little power. A community board can either approve the site recommended by the agency sponsoring, for example, a group home, suggest one or more alternate sites, or object 1) based on the oversaturation of the community board area with community residences or facilities or 2) based on the oversaturation of the same kind of group home in the area in proximity to the proposed facility.

As a result, most people come away from the public hearing with the sense that the decision was really made before the hearing started.

My more sensible approach affords a

facility's sponsoring agency ample time to schedule meetings and informal gatherings with community leaders, concerned residents and local officials. In this manner, community concerns can be addressed, perhaps in a series of smaller groupings. Agencies could reach out to communities in an atmosphere less threatening to the community.

Unlike the lengthy reviews mandated under the City's Uniformed Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP), Section 41.34 provides only 40 days for a community board to 1) schedule a hearing with adequate mail and newspaper notices, 2) look at any alternate sites and 3) make its decision.

The City review process affords a community board 60 days to hold a hearing and pass its decision on to the City Planning Commission and the City Council. In addition, a community board can receive notice that an application under the City review process is being made and, thus, it is able to take an early look at the proposal.

A fair opportunity review should facilitate a dialogue among the parties. Under the current state law, heated hearings remain the rule rather than the exception.

Under my proposal, the licensing state agency commissioner's designee would review the site based on the testimony presented, including presentations on saturation and alternate sites, and make a recommendation to the commissioner.

The writer is a member of Community Board 26 and a legislative aide to City Councilman Sheldon Leffler.