

Booming Babies

An Bronx community board hosts a loud, long debate over the future of a proposed youth center

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During its April 18th meeting, leaders and members of Community Board 9 in the east Bronx debated the possible opening of a youth center by a local church in a quiet neighborhood of Blackrock Avenue

More than 60 people attended the meeting, including many homeowners who opposed the possible opening of a youth center in their community. Many believe that the tranquility of the neighborhood might be disturbed. John Rivera, a 52 year-old homeowner, was totally against this proposal. "I do not want it there; I have had bad experiences with group homes. There were kids screaming all over the place and jumping over people's backyards.

The church intends to demolish the property and construct a two story building, which will include a gymnasium, a kitchen, office space, classrooms, bathrooms, and supply space

You buy a house in a peaceful neighborhood that cost you \$200,000 or \$300,000 and then group homes come into the community and mess up everything. These are trouble kids that start causing problems hanging out on the streets, they have bad habits and you don't want those kids near your own children," said Rivera.

Opening a youth center is an unofficial proposal made by The Church of the Revelation, a small neighborhood Pentecostal congregation that is located at 1154 White Plains Road in the eastern portion of the Bronx.

At the meeting a written memorandum prepared by the church was given to attendees. The memo has also been circulated to local residents of Blackrock Avenue. In it, the church explains its intentions to purchase property located at 1947 Blackrock Avenue, where it plans to build the community youth center. They also stated that they do not wish to move forward without considering the community's opinion on this matter.

According to the memo their objective is to buy a house and adjacent vacant lot. The



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church intends to demolish the property and construct a two story building, which will include a gymnasium, a kitchen, office space, classrooms, bathrooms, and supply space. The place will serve not only adolescents and children, but also adults and elderly. It will have various programs aimed at preventing delinquency and crime in the community. These programs will provide recreational activities, organized sports, tutoring, counseling, arts and crafts and an after school program. There will be no fees charge to the community or to anyone interested in joining the center. This project will cost approximately \$2,000,000 and will be founded entirely with the Church's money.

Luis Vega, 46, a Pastor for the church was in attendance. "We did not expect this kind of reaction from the community, we thought they were going to jump on it, since there are going to be no fees, we are paying for the staff, the construction, everything! They are protecting their neighborhood, and it is understandable. They surely think we might have a hidden agenda, which is not the case," said Vega.

But residents are skeptical and not willing to give in. Rosa Morales, a 43-year-old resident and homeowner said she was very angry because she does not want anything that will disturb the tranquility in her neighborhood. "I am too busy with my job and housework to be worrying about this issue also. I simply don't want it in my block," said Morales. She added that she understands it might bring positive results in the community, but said she does not want to take chances. Others like Richard Smith, a 35-year-old resident, are more positive about the issue. He said he don't understand the opposition of the community, since it is

a plan for a good cause.

"I think this is surely going to bring a good outcome in the community; it is for our benefit. I just do not get the hostility," said Smith. He also said that the community is being selfish, since the project will benefit those kids who are involve in gangs and drugs. "These children should be the community's priority," he concluded.

There are no nearby centers for kids in the community. The closest center is a Kips

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Bay Boys and Girls Club that is probably a mile from Blackrock Avenue. The other two are Pathways For Youth and Bronx YMCA, which are about 1 1/2 miles away.

Pastor Vega said that he was particularly frustrated with one of the Board members, who happens to live in this block. He pre-

ferred to keep the name anonymous, but said this person had been a community activist for a long time. "This person was against our project, without even knowing what it was all about. She basically got the residents started, and held a meeting in the community to put them against the idea too. She brainwashed them," said Vega. He also said that was where the rumor that they wanted to build a group home got started. "This was never our intention. The residents trusted her and she gave them bad information," he concluded.

The Community Board said that since this is an unofficial proposal, they cannot move forward, and even if this turns into an issue they can only serve as mediators between the church and the residents. This is because they are dealing with private property and private money. "We could have just bought the property and done whatever we wanted. We do not need their permission, but we don't want to move forward without the community's blessing. We want them to feel comfortable and welcome us with a positive attitude," said Vega. Elizabeth Rodriguez, Chairperson of the Land and Zoning Committee, said that this would probably turn into a formal issue. "I think that the residents did not read the memo right and if they did they did not understand it. It is clear that they want to benefit the community," said Rodriguez.

There will probably be a meeting soon, but the day has not yet been chosen. At the meeting the community's concerns will be discussed, and they will try to reach a solution. "We are looking forward for this meeting. If we don't build there, it was not meant to be. Maybe God has a better site," said Vega.