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Home for retarded causes confusion in subdivision

By MARY GNIEWEK

Homeowners in the West Franklin Estates Subdivision of Farmington Hills have many questions but few answers about a proposed foster care home for five severely retarded adults to be located in their neighborhood.

Homeowners, led by Robert Pratt, say questions to various government agencies have only compounded their confusion.

"I've heard so many conflicting stories about how these homes are operated that it has become a primary concern," Pratt said.

The homeowners association has listened to representatives of the Macomb Oakland Regional Center (MORC) of the state Department of Mental Health, developers of the plan.

They've heard from William Ricks, former MORC worker and intended home supervisor, who is administrator of Group Home Services Inc., a non-profit corporation established last February to oversee the project.

They've also talked with neighbors of a foster care home for severely retarded adults in Novi and to parents of severely retarded adult who lives in a foster care home.

"We hear that the training of the folks who live in the homes is non-exis-

tent, that attendants can't cope with unruly behavior, and the state Department of Social Services doesn't respond to neighbors' complaints," Pratt said.

"Macomb-Oakland representatives said there may be aggressive patients living there. Our fear is not in having retarded in the neighborhood, it's the aspect of an uncontrollable unit.

"We're concerned about our families."

HOMEOWNERS learned of the proposal two weeks ago by workers building an addition onto the four-bedroom house on Glenmar, east of Farmington Road between 13 and 14 Mile roads.

The proposal calls for the five as yet unspecified residents to be moved into the house probably by mid-November, if the state Department of Social Services approves the application.

The residents would attend sheltered workshops or classes daily and live in the community fulltime. It's uncertain whether the household would consist of all men or women or both.

Because of a mixup by Social Services, which sent a mandatory 45-day advance notification certificate to the city of Farmington instead of Farmington Hills, City Clerk Floyd Cairns

didn't get formal notification of the state's intentions until Monday.

Cairns called Social Services last week after subdivision residents asked a surprised city council what could be done about the proposal. It was the first the city had heard about it.

Social Services issued another 45-day notification, this time to Farmington Hills, which has until Nov. 3 to respond. The city has no authority to reject the proposal on the basis of citizen discontent.

THE CITY'S responsibility lies only with ensuring that the house is up to code and that the structure isn't within 1,500 feet of another foster care home, as prescribed by state law. State law supersedes local zoning ordinances.

"There really isn't much we can do," said Councilman Donn Wolf. "It's between the state and the residents themselves."

Social Services will decide on the basis of the application if the home should be issued a license.

"We're still evaluating the proposal," Barbara Smalley said this week.

Ms. Smalley is with the adult foster care licensing regional office, a division of Social Services, in Royal Oak. She said the home will be evaluated on the suitability of the site and its condi-

tion. Group Home Services Inc. and its administrator Ricks will also be evaluated.

Ricks, who has worked in several adult foster care homes and for MORC for two years, said he is anxious to please the neighbors. He has met with association board members twice.

"We will have absolute control of the home," Ricks said. "Our main goal is the well-being of the retarded."

"I can understand community resistance. A lot of people confuse mental illness with mental retardation."

Ricks said the staff will be experienced and a house manager will live-in fulltime for at least the first three months. In addition, there will be two staff members on duty at all times when the five residents are home.

The house will be Ricks' first solo endeavor.

MORC has developed plans for 74 foster care homes now in operation in Michigan. Its role is to find suitable sites, corporations wishing to invest money, and to develop non-profit corporations to run the homes.

"We're very proud of our homes," said Tom Miller, a MORC supervisor.

"We think we have a lot of monitoring by supervisors, by a parents committee, by a quality of life team, all making frequent unannounced visits."

Farmington's resident foster home expert, Mary Wagner, who is executive director of Community Living Centers which sponsors nine homes for the retarded including two in Farmington Hills and one in Farmington, agrees that government agencies make frequent checks of foster care homes to see how well they're operating.

"Neighbors complain about lack of supervision, but the licensing department checks the homes every month, and so does the mental health department," she said.

"People who are against these homes aren't going to change their minds," Mrs. Wagner said.

She said most applicant agencies can be investigated on the basis of their prior record — how they run other homes. "I guess if it's a first home, you have to give the applicant an opportunity to prove himself," she said.



A labor of love is how R.J. Rice looks upon his musical career, especially when it includes his daughter Crystal after whom his first hit recording was named (Staff photo by Randy Borst)

World of music is late night labor of love

Lights can be seen burning until the wee hours of the morning at Ambience Recordings Inc. of Farmington Hills where R.J.'s Latest Arrivals are cutting their newest album.

The Detroit vocal group has been holding up to 10-hour recording sessions to finish a second album that presently remains untitled.

Late-night hours have always been an integral part of R.J.'s (or Ralph James Rice's) musical career, he explains.

Along with another member of the group that is now called, R.J.'s Newest Arrivals, R.J. has been singing in bands since he was 12 years old.

"We worked colleges and country clubs all around Michigan for only \$50 a night," he remembers. "I knew we were being taken advantage of, but I loved it so much. I think I would've done it for nothing," R.J. says.

The original group that R.J. worked with has experienced some changes in the last 10 years which include a temporary break-up and a few new additions — his wife, Debra, for one.

With the addition of two vocalists and the inspiration of R.J.'s 2-year-old daughter, Crystal, the singers went on to record their first album (entitled "Crystal") in February 1979.

R.J.'s Latest Arrivals are now recording their second album which includes all of their new work. One of the singles was derived from the Star Trek film, but the album as a

whole cannot be classified any one type of music.

"We sing rhythm and blues, pop, disco, and even some new wave," explains R.J. "Because you have to follow the trends."

Although he does not play a musical instrument, R.J. writes all of his own music. He claims he "just has a good ear," and the group has their own back-up band.

Music seems to be a serious business for R.J., according to June McGregor, Ambience's creative service manager. In addition to 10-hour recording sessions, R.J. holds a "strong set of personal ethics," she says.

"He doesn't drink or smoke," she explains. "He never seems to impress his views on the other members of the group, but there is no drinking during or before a recording," she says.

R.J. is a different breed of musician, McGregor says. "I've worked with many groups and I've never seen anyone take it (music) so seriously. . . . Once he goes into the studio, you can't interrupt him," she says.

When asked if his serious-mindedness or close personal ties with the group's members interferes with collective decision-making within the group, R.J. says, he tries to be fair, and he tries to keep his personal relationships separate from what he considers business (or music).

"My wife and I don't talk much when we go home," he explains, "or at least, I try not to."



This house in the West Franklin Subdivision has become the center of controversy since residents have learned it is going to be used as a home for the

retarded. Residents would like to have a say in the matter, but city council believes there is little the city can do to stop the use. (Staff photo)

North students suspended after picketing school

By MARY GNIEWEK

Three students who picketed North Farmington High School's parking lot last week to protest a \$10 parking fee received one-day suspensions from school.

School administrators wouldn't release the names of the three, a senior and two sophomores, who left school after the early morning strike on Sept. 16.

At one stage, the pre-first hour strike had the support of about 20 students, but the crowd disbanded and returned to class all except for the three who later received suspensions.

The day of the strike, North Assistant Principal Norman Dickson said the three would be treated "like any other unexcused absences."

But suspensions aren't part of the new attendance policy the Farmington Board of Education adopted in August by a 6 to 1 vote. It stipulates that par-

ents be notified by mail after the fourth absence — excused or unexcused — and again after the seventh.

School principal Clayton Graham denied that the suspensions were an attempt at revenge against the strike ring-leaders.

"The kids were suspended because they skipped school that day," Graham said. "We told all the kids out there to come to class, these three didn't come."

Graham said there were conferences with parents in all three cases. Two students were suspended for just a matter of hours, the other received a full day suspension, he said.

"IN EACH CASE, the infraction was a little different," Graham said.

Asked if it was normal procedure at North to suspend class skippers, Graham said, "It would depend. We look at the student's full record. Anytime we contemplate a student's record, we handle discipline accordingly."

Lewis Schulman, superintendent of Farmington Public Schools, supports Graham's action.

"There was no great violation of civil liberties," insisted Schulman.

"They didn't interfere with the kids' right to picket. Those (suspended) were guilty of insubordination, of absences, or class skipping."

Schulman said most students are satisfied with the new parking lot security system. Beginning this fall, students who wish to park in the lot daily pay a \$10 yearly fee. Casual drivers pay 25 cents a day.

Lots at all three district high schools were fenced and guards hired in August to cut down on vandalism and student loitering.

Not all students are happy with the new system.

"I don't think it's right," said Todd McGregor, a sophomore who picketed last week.

"I'm going to be driving to school soon and I don't want to pay 25 cents a day."



CLAYTON GRAHAM

McGregor believes a lot more students would have picketed if it hadn't been raining while the strike was in progress. He also said administrators telling kids to get into school put a damper on things.

Rumors circulated that one of the girls suspended was expelled, but no such action was taken by the board of education, through which expulsions must be cleared.

Students left at bus stops

Drivers stage wild cat strike

By MARY GNIEWEK

A quarter of Farmington's 65 school bus drivers called in sick yesterday morning to protest a technical part of the contract the Farmington Board of Education ratified Tuesday with the Farmington Bus Drivers Association.

Approximately 18 drivers, members of the association, were absent from work, which stranded students across the district.

The controversy centered on contract formula for computation of work hours and number of runs. School officials met with union president Patricia Spencer and with four representatives yesterday to iron out those differences.

Ironically, the union membership

had overwhelmingly ratified the contract prior to the board's okay. Spencer was not available for comment.

"The news came as a complete surprise to me this morning," said Jack Inch, school board president.

Inch was appraised of the situation early Wednesday and notified all other board members, who unanimously ratified the pact. The board discussed the contract at a closed meeting Sept. 9 before rendering the 7-0 decision.

THE TWO YEAR package, which expires June 30, 1982, includes wage increases in line with other district contracts and some fringe benefit improvements, Inch said.

"We discussed it thoroughly and it was a favorable contract," he said.

School superintendent Lewis Schulman expected students to be delivered home safely Wednesday after the four-hour meeting.

"I hope it's resolved," he said.

Each driver is guaranteed five hours pay daily. The discrepancy centered on how the drivers should be compensated for overtime. Some runs are longer than others and heavy traffic also causes delays which add to overtime.

"It wasn't that these people weren't getting paid (overtime) but there are about 16 different ways to figure it out," Schulman said.

"We changed the formula." Despite the slowdown, school absenteeism was in the normal range yesterday. Working drivers made double runs

and some parents drove their children to school.

Linda Nolan, mother of a Woodcrest Elementary school student, was surprised Wednesday to find her child stranded at the bus stop.

"Some kids came over and told me the bus drivers were on strike," said the Greenacres Subdivision resident.

"Apparently, some of the parents had been notified by the school district."

Mrs. Nolan took five children from the subdivision to school before heading for work. About 30 students live in that Farmington Hills subdivision.

School officials told Mrs. Nolan that if enough buses weren't available, children would be kept at school until parents came to pick them up.

what's inside

Amusements . . . Section D
Community Calendar . . . 3C
Editorials 16A
Obituaries 6A
Sports Section B
Suburban Life Section C



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