

Unwanted Homeless Meet an Unusual Backyard

By DENNIS HEVESI

DRAPED in the garb of the grieving, Angela Mooney rode in a long black hearse to a public hearing five years ago to dramatize her opposition to construction of a shelter for homeless families in her neighborhood. Such was the fear and anger of citizens in Briarwood, Queens, that the shelter and its 300 residents would despoil their community of winding streets, private homes and apartment buildings.

"When I gave my speech," Mrs. Mooney said, recalling the public hearing five years ago, "I prefaced by saying I was dressed in black to demonstrate the death of the city if this plan went through." The people of Briarwood strenuously fought the shelter, which is scheduled to open in July. They packed the meetings, waving their placards. They raised \$92,000 to hire a prestigious law firm and fought all the way to the State Court of Appeals. They lost.

And then they did something unusual. With as much commitment as they showed in fighting the shelter, they embraced it. In the words of Marianne Loser, one of the leading opponents: "We decided to make the best of it, that having a model shelter would be good for the shelter residents and the residents of Briarwood."

Mrs. Mooney said: "I'm still not glad it's there. But we didn't want our neighbors to flee because of fear of an unknown entity. So we felt we had to do all that we could do to make this shelter work."

And they have. Eight of the 15 members of the Briarwood Shelter Community Advisory Committee were among those who most vociferously fought the shelter when the Koch administration proposed shelters around the city in 1987, a proposal that was echoed in Mayor David N. Dinkins's plan to build 24 scattered shelters. Mrs. Loser is chairwoman of the committee.

"We felt the city never really cared for the homeless in these crime-infested, roach-infested shelters," Mrs. Mooney said. "We felt it would be too big, too many people." Mrs. Loser said: "We're a purely residential community, and the hotels they used as shelters, which were run so terribly, destroyed neighborhoods. The very logical fears were crime, of course, and drugs, and concern about property values."

Borough President Claire Shulman of Queens, who has been pivotal to the committee's effort to make the shelter work, said that she was happy with its neighbors because "they took a situation they were fearful of and turned it around to where they are helping people who are less fortunate, more vulnerable."

"The problem," Mrs. Shulman continued, "is that the city comes in, dumps a facility and then goes away."

"In this case, it's not going to be that way," she said. To begin with, the committee insisted that the \$14 million shelter not appear institutional, but look like part of the community. "We went to a shelter in Springfield Gardens," Mrs. Loser said. "It was a very eye-catching green. For our shelter, we insisted that the city use a brick that was closer in color to the apartment building across the street."

Mrs. Mooney said, "We asked for nice shrubbery, so that it's more like the neighborhood, so the people don't feel they are different."

But the committee's demands went far beyond the cosmetic.

At its insistence, the city eliminated two apartments in the shelter, making room for a day-care center.

With Mrs. Shulman's cooperation -- "She knows the right people to call," Mrs. Loser said -- the committee has met monthly with representatives of the Mayor's Office of Homelessness, his Office of Construction, the Human Resources Administration, the Board of Education and the Salvation Army, which will operate the shelter. Bank Street College and La Guardia Community College have been brought in to create programs for shelter residents. "It's a comprehensive, collaborative model we have developed," said Fern Khan, a dean at Bank Street. Parenting classes will be available at the shelter. There will be a Head Start program for 3- to 5-year-olds.

School-age children will have an after-school program, coordinated by the Board of Education, providing tutoring and recreation. "Some may need stories read to them; some may need homework help," said Francine Goldstein, director of student support services for the board.

In conjunction with the Department of Cultural Affairs, Ms. Goldstein said, "we will be taking kids to cultural institutions -- the Hall of Science, the ballet, concerts." La Guardia will offer classes in clerical, food service and office skills, and courses leading to Graduate Equivalency Diplomas.

Ms. Goldstein said the central board is working with school districts to equitably distribute the 100 students expected from the shelter. "We don't want one school to be overburdened," she said, "and we don't want children stigmatized."

Mrs. Mooney said, "We're preparing a pamphlet listing services in the neighborhood: where to cash their checks, where the stores are." Volunteers from the neighborhood will work at the shelter. "We have a lot of well-educated and caring people," Mrs. Mooney said. "One will teach computers. Others volunteered to spend time with the children."

"I feel it's going to be good," Mrs. Mooney said, "because of our efforts."

Photo: When a shelter for homeless families was proposed at 134th Street and Union Turnpike in Queens, it was fiercely opposed by residents in the area. Now, five years later, nearly completed, it is embraced with the same fervor. More than half of its advisory board members opposed its arrival. (Dith Pran/The New York Times)

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City Seeks Shelter From Storm of Protest

By Ken Yamada. STAFF WRITER Newsday

Construction of a homeless shelter in Briarwood continues as angry residents protest, litigation ends and community leaders plea for cooperation.

The foundation for the city Human Resources Administration's 93-apartment homeless shelter is now being laid on the southwest corner of 134th Street and Union Turnpike. In an attempt to placate the anxieties of residents who live nearby, Borough President Claire Shulman has recruited volunteers for a citizen-HRA advisory committee during the past month. The committee, made up of about 20 residents and city officials, will make recommendations to the shelter's operators on the facility's programs, services and living conditions, HRA spokesman Cardell Atwood said.

But many residents feel the committee is not enough. They want work on the shelter halted. Last month, just a few blocks away from the construction site, more than 200 residents crowded into the auditorium of Archbishop Molloy High School for a meeting called by the Briarwood Community Association to discuss the advisory group. But many in the audience instead complained, argued and debated the shelter's merits.

In an attempt to assuage the crowd, Angela Mooney, former association president, stepped to the podium and spoke. "We live here and the shelter's going to be here," Mooney said. "And we're going to have to do something to make this work."

Mooney's prognosis was based on the construction work already begun and by a Queens State Supreme Court justice's dismissal in September of a suit brought to block the shelter. The suit was filed by State Sen. Jeremy S. Weinstein, Shulman, the association and others. Weinstein later said: "I think the court failed to recognize that both the city and the state bullied this community and it suggests that communities no longer have any say whatsoever in their future."

At last month's meeting, Nancy Wackstein, director of the Mayor's Office on Homelessness and Single Room Occupancy Housing, said the shelter, expected to open in early 1992, will provide homeless families with one-bedroom or larger apartments. The shelter will also provide child care, job training, counseling, recreation and housing relocation services. The HRA still must choose a nonprofit operator to run the shelter, she said.

"A facility like this is designed to help stabilize people's lives," Wackstein said. "This is simply not a warehousing of people in a shelter."

Wackstein said the apartments will be different from other city shelters where armies of single men sleep on cots in a large room. Only families will be allowed to move into the apartments, she said. The majority of the building's 300 occupants are expected to be children.

"This is the direction we want to go if we want to get these poor families on their feet again," Wackstein said. Many people from Briarwood, a neighborhood of Tudor-style apartments with Manhattan-priced rents, scorned the answers Wackstein and other city officials gave. "I'll be damned if I open my door and have somebody laying there and he's from two blocks away and

I'm paying \$ 900 a month rent," said one woman who said she was a teacher. "You know what you're going to have - you'll have a South Bronx in Briarwood."

Other residents voiced fears of increased crime, garbage, drug abuse and school overcrowding. City officials attending the meeting said crime problems would have to be addressed by police. Local schools would receive additional funding if attendance is increased by children from the shelter, they said. Shulman encouraged residents to volunteer for the shelter's advisory committee, telling them to contact her office. She assured them she personally will monitor any problems that might arise.

She said: "We will watch it, police it and monitor it."