

BY THOMAS COGAN

The November meeting of the Community Board 1 cabinet had an uncomplicated format, being a succession of reports from groups talking about health, rehabilitation and the streets of Northwest Queens. Seemingly innocuous, the presentations at the commissary of Kaufman Studios in Astoria did lead to a couple of emotional moments—even the threat of bloodshed—which was jarring, especially after enthusiastic talk about blood donations. But before the meeting ended, everyone was hearing about a community garden and organic vegetables.

First of the groups to speak was Selfhelp Community Services and NORC, the Naturally Occurring Retirement Community, represented by Betsy Smith and Mary Hayes. Selfhelp, Smith said, was begun in 1936 as an aid to persons fleeing Nazi Germany but later became a home health care service. It now has six senior service centers and six senior housing buildings in Astoria, Woodside, Jackson Heights and Fresh Meadows. Among other activities, NORC works with the Visiting Nurse Service, securing 18 hours a week from them. Mention of the VNS did not sit well with Rose Marie Poveromo, board member and president of the United Community Civic Association, who said it “abandoned” her handicapped sister after only a day of treatment. Adding to the criticism was local activist Fran McDonald, who said the VNS has been known to treat indigent persons while surreptitiously attaching liens on any property they may have. She also wanted it known that Selfhelp and NORC receive public funding.

The next speaker, Glenn Martin of the Fortune Society, assumed that he, representing

released prisoners, would be adding to the critical atmosphere, but in fact he was treated well (though George Delis, Board 1 district manager, kept calling him Glenn Miller). He announced that the group’s Queens drop-in center, currently in Dutch Kills, would soon be located on Northern Boulevard. Starting the drop-in center was an act of intervention for Fortune, which a few years ago began to pick up prisoners released from Rikers Island and dropped at Queensboro Plaza. This was done in the belief that without such action, many of the released inmates would get into further criminal activity before returning to whatever homes they had. Martin said that one of the vital functions of the Fortune Society is career development, and toward that end it has connections with employers throughout the city and state. Substance abuse treatment and housing are also vital. Martin said the group purchased an abandoned but baronial house called The Castle, at West 140th Street and Riverside Drive in Manhattan, and set it up in the face of opposition in the West Harlem neighborhood. That opposition had turned to support, he said, by the time they purchased a nearby house to expand the residential program. Jerry Walsh, president of the Dutch Kills Civic Association, said he lives across the street from the drop-in center and in four years has known of no disruptive incidents there.

Betty Warton, pushing for the Mount Sinai Hospital blood drive, said only two percent of

New Yorkers give blood. Yadira Pagan of the New York Blood Center, who accompanied her, said that the group has to import a quarter of its blood supply from out of state. She said that the center conducts blood drives all over the city. High schools supply 15 percent of that amount, she said. One person, mindful of a previous speaker, asked if any comes from Rikers Island. Yes, the two answered, but only from workers there, who are responsive to blood drives; the inmates are barred from contributing. They said that anyone between 16 and 75 years of age and weighing 110 pounds or more could give blood once every eight weeks. A few representatives of the other groups present at the meeting said they put on blood drives among their members, and would be getting in touch with the center soon.

When Felix Okolo of the Department of Transportation addressed the meeting about such matters as a traffic camera, a traffic light and a truck route in East Elmhurst, he probably expected some sharp commentary, which any DOT official must expect, and seemed ready to accept it smilingly. But the fury of the attack by Fran McDonald, especially concerning a truck route to and from the Steinway Industrial Area (SIA), had his smile wavering. The traffic camera and the traffic light were located on 81st Street at 21st Avenue, and the truck route in question was the same 81st Street, which goes in and out of the SIA via 19th Avenue, directly north of the junction with the light and camera.

McDonald and others were angry that the camera had been removed at the end of a test period, since it struck them that it should be permanent. But McDonald made it plain that 81st Street as a truck route is insufferable. Between Ditmars Boulevard and 19th Avenue, 81st Street is wide and two-way, one side having mainly two-story row houses, the other having a vine-covered wall that marks the western end of La Guardia Airport. McDonald said it is also the route of the Buckeye fuel pipeline that continues to both La Guardia and Kennedy Airports and was in the news earlier this year with the arrest of alleged terrorists who have been accused of plotting to sabotage it. “There will be blood in the streets if 81st Street remains a truck route,” McDonald declared, “and you can quote me.”

A community garden started by Goodwill Industries provided quite a contrast to the previous agenda item. Garret Ramirez was present to talk about Two Coves Garden on Astoria Boulevard between 8th and 12th Streets, where one can “grow vegetables, plant flowers, compost and connect with nature”. Ramirez called it the only community garden that is barrier-free, having no fence around it. He said the garden’s managers are planning to make the program entirely organic and also establish distribution of vegetables to the community. He concluded by announcing that visitors are welcome and volunteers are wanted.

The annual Thanksgiving dinner sponsored by the Greek-American Homeowners Association is to be held as usual at GAHOA headquarters, 23-49 31st St., Thursday afternoon, November 22.



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