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The Public Ought to Know: Fall heralds city hearings on issues for the aging

By Corey Bearak

This month, senior citizens' issues pre-occupy my volunteer plate, with a lot of meetings of the executive board of Services Now for Adult Persons.



Also, the program Naturally Occurring Retirement Community Without Walls serving Bellerose, Floral Park and New Hyde Park held a ribbon-cutting last week and a community open house Tuesday to herald its new office at 83-51 268th Street (see http://northeastqueensjewish.org/NORC_WOW_PR.htm).

Through my first two stints in city government, each October I would work on testimony for my principal - first a council member, then a borough president - for annual hearings held every October by the city's Department for the Aging. This year, the first hearing is in Brooklyn on Oct. 26 and the last is in Manhattan on Nov. 4. The Staten Island hearing is on Oct. 27 and The Bronx hearing is on Nov. 3. Queens residents get their chance on Oct. 28 at 10 a.m. at the Borough Hall. See http://nyc.gov/html/dfta/pdf/publichear_announce04.pdf for a registration card and more information.

While the hearings average about 25 speakers, more residents, including seniors, their advocates and their elected, should testify. We should seize the opportunity to raise issues not covered by the city department in its annual plan, or simply to comment on the plan.

The department conducts these public hearings on its 2005-2006 annual plan for services under the (federal) Older Americans Act and the New

York State Community Services for the Elderly Program and the Expanded In-Home Services for the Elderly Program. These federal and state programs fund much of the department's budget.

The planning document from the department available on line (http://nyc.gov/html/dfta/pdf/publichear_annualplan9-04.pdf) represents the second year of a four-year plan covering April 1, 2004 to March 31, 2008 in accordance with the Older Americans Act's amendments of 2000. The department submits its plan, including strategic objectives for programs funded through the act, the state community services program, the in-home services program and other sources to the State Office for the Aging.

My main concern is enabling seniors to remain living with dignity in their homes and in their communities. A New York phenomenon of sorts is the number of seniors without their children living in the area. The Bearak family appears to be one of the exceptions with my wife's parent's, Tessie and Lou Confino, and, until a year ago, my mom and step-dad, Phyllis and Charlie Stark, living nearby just blocks away.

That explains my involvement in the retirement community without walls program, Services Now for Adult Persons and the senior programs of the Samuel Field Young Men and Young Women Hebrew Association and Queens Jewish Community Council. The plan highlights poverty among seniors and increases in the number of frail elderly, particularly women living alone.

In this light, the city department's insistence on delivering frozen meals in the Bronx with the intention of extending this model for Meals on Wheels citywide flies in the face of the need. Meals on Wheels offers daily contact five days a week. The frozen meals involve but two deliveries per week.

My previous columns have touted legislation to help make housing more affordable for seniors. The city department's legislative advocacy again leaves out these bills. State Assemblywoman Catherine Nolan (D-Ridgewood) is sponsoring a bill which would apply an annual cost-of-living adjustment to the existing income eligibility limits for the senior homeowner and rent exemptions. Senior tenants 62 or older with a gross income of less than \$24,000 and who pay more than a third of their income on rent would be eligible to have their rent frozen. Senior homeowners 65 or older with annual incomes below \$24,000 qualify for the maximum 50

percent senior homeowner exemption, which also provides a graduated 5 percent exemption in 5 percent increments to seniors earning more than \$24,000 up to a \$32,400 maximum. Assemblywoman Audrey Pheffer (D-Rockaways) has a similar bill, but it applies only to the rent-increase exemption.

State Assemblywoman Ann-Margaret Carrozza (D-Bayside) is sponsoring a bill which would provide relief to senior citizens - homeowners, tenants and co-op owners - who face escalating water bills by reducing rent increases for senior tenants and taxes for senior homeowners. I hope mayoral politics plays no role in their exclusion since the former Bronx borough president proposed both bills.

The Department for the Aging should also tout newer legislation: A bill by Assemblyman Mark Weprin (D-Bayside) would allow Access-A-Ride vans to a ride across county lines; it would allow a Queens resident to travel from their Hollis home to their Lake Success doctor a few blocks beyond the city line.

Weprin is co-sponsoring Pheffer's bill which would allow medical and drug costs to reduce income for Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption eligibility.

Last year's transcripts of the hearings indicated that only few elected officials testified, 15 including representatives spoke. Two others sent staffers to monitor the Queens hearing. There's still time to read the plan, prepare comments and either submit them or testify in person.

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