

The METROWEST DAILY NEWS

Anger's not the answer

By David McLaughlin / Daily News Staff

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FRAMINGHAM -- Leaders of social service agencies, desperate to end what they see as townwide anger directed at them and their clients, are calling for leadership that can foster dialogue between both sides.

In an editorial board meeting with the Daily News this week, executive directors from three local agencies expressed frustration that attempts at "civil discourse" with neighbors about expansion projects have led nowhere.

"I don't think there's been a reasonable exchange of ideas and opinions. The only thing people want to talk about is don't open that program in my neighborhood with those kids," said Eric Masi, the head of Wayside Youth and Family Support Network.

Wayside is locked in a legal battle with neighbors fighting its proposed Lockland Avenue residential facility. After more than three years of meetings with neighbors, he said, it was only when the agency turned to "legal hardball" that it made progress with its proposal.

Masi called Wayside's efforts to meet and talk with neighbors "a waste" and "a disservice to my clients."

News of expansion projects by Wayside and the South Middlesex Opportunity Council have triggered a new backlash against social service agencies. What makes today's opposition unique, they said, is that it is coming from many corners of Framingham.

"Now it's pervasive across the community -- the anger, the vitriol, whatever, and I don't think it's confined to Framingham. I think it's reflective of trends in the larger culture," said SMOC Executive Director Jim Cuddy.

SMOC's plan to move its Sage House family shelter program to the former Framingham Nursing Home building on Winter Street has galvanized opponents of social service agencies who charge Framingham is overburdened with the organizations.

Cuddy insisted the nonprofit made "attempt after attempt" to meet with neighbors about the program, which will house women recovering from drug and alcohol addiction and their children.

"Here's what we've found with Winter Street -- it's impossible to have civil discourse. You can't have it," he said.

Neighbors there have formed an opposition group and are distributing lawn signs aimed against social service providers. Officials from the agencies say they are disheartened by the angry protests directed at them.

"This is very painful for our staff and clients at group homes," said Bill Taylor, the chief executive officer of Advocates Inc. "If the goal is to make Framingham less welcoming, it is succeeding, and it hurts."

The nonprofit officials, however, indicated support for meeting with their critics. Masi suggested a forum to pull together the nonprofits and the public to talk about social services in Framingham. He also supports a proposed bylaw change that will be taken up by Town Meeting next week and which would give the Planning Board some limited review over so-called Dover Amendment projects like Wayside's and SMOC's.

"Generally, I wouldn't be opposed at all to an advisory process with the Planning Board....There is no process, and that's one of the things that infuriates people," he said.

Selectmen tried to host a "social services summit" recently, but only the Salvation Army attended. Cuddy criticized similar selectmen's meetings for typically dissolving into a "public circus" dominated by "vitriol and fear and hatred."

"You've got to expect leadership from some place," he said. "There's got to be somebody who can say it's time to have a dialogue."