

Commissioners, health board still at odds

By **TONYA V. SMITH**
Chronicle Staff Writer

Both the county Board of Commissioners and members of the Forsyth-Stokes Area Mental Health Authority board agree that before a group home is opened, community members and commissioners should be notified. The two groups disagree about what to do after both parties have been notified, especially when public sentiment is overwhelmingly against the home.

Since the controversial opening of the Willie M. group home at 401 Hearths Drive, the commissioners and the mental health board have been at odds. One commissioner, Forrest E. Conrad, has even threatened to try to cut the authority's budgets and oust board members.

In their meeting Monday night, the commissioners studied a preliminary policy on group home site selection and public notification prepared by members of the mental health board.

The policy outlines the rights of clients to community-based services, the need for group homes and procedures for site selection, community notification and final site approval.

After an option for selected

property has been signed, "immediate neighbors (within at least one block of the site) will be notified through home to home visits," according to the policy. "Fliers about the home and other relevant information will be distributed to these and other neighbors and to neighborhood groups and churches."

In addition, the commissioners, city Board of Aldermen and other public officials would be notified, said Jean Irvin, a mental health board member who helped draw up the proposal.

County Manager Graham W. Pevier suggested the board change the policy to include: early notification of commissioners in the group home site selection process; definitions of responsibilities of people involved in site selection; establishment of site guidelines; guarantee to hear public response to selection.

Conrad suggested that the commissioners push for legislation giving them power to review and approve mental health budgets.

Whereas the mental health board has no legal obligation to notify commissioners of a potential group home site, the board wants to do so if it will foster the working

relationship between the two groups, Irvin said.

"It's the wish of the Mental Health Authority to work with the commissioners in anyway we can. We have no problem with notifying them," she said.

Irvin would not say a push for legislation was groundless, but she did say any move towards legislation should not be made in light of the controversy surrounding the Hearthside Willie M. home.

"That is a legitimate issue for people to look at but I'd have to see what specific legislation was proposed," Irvin said.

Not advocating giving the Board of Commissioners veto power, Irvin said she did not oppose some system of checks and balances.

"I always think that in community organizations, in the business of using public money for the provision of services, it's creative to use a system of checks and balances," Irvin said. "As it relates specifically to group homes, I don't think it's an issue of place only. There are other issues that the Mental Health Authority deals with."

"I just think there needs to be somewhere for perhaps people who don't agree with the board to go,"

said Mary Lauffer, another board member. "I do believe there should be something else besides the board."

Lauffer said the commissioners should have veto power over the board's decisions in extreme cases of public disapproval of a particular group home site.

"They should have some type of veto power in extreme cases," Lauffer said.

Nevertheless, there will always be negative public sentiment when discussion arises about a group home planning to locate in a community, Irvin said.

"Originally when the Willie M. class was identified in the state it was assumed by everyone that these are children that are out of control," Irvin said. "The fact is that these kids had already been in our community for years. They didn't just pop up out of nowhere."

"The issue is that some communities get upset when something outside of the parameters of what they feel comfortable with is introduced to their community. I do firmly believe that neighborhood diversity within a community can only be positive."

Ebenezer Baptist pastor speaks about Dr. King in Atlanta

ATLANTA (AP) -- The Rev. Joseph L. Roberts told the first service of "King Week, '89" that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s teachings were like still waters awaiting the flock.

"Martin was like spring water," the Ebenezer Baptist Church pastor said during an ecumenical service marking the 60th anniversary of King's birth. "We had but to stoop down and drink and live."

"His kind of love challenges us to take some risks we are not taking. Dr. King's preaching will not leave us in peace," said the man who now heads the Atlanta church where King once was co-pastor with his father.

Meanwhile, the Rev. Joseph Lowery, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which King founded, told a German congregation the world's churches must help keep alive King's dream of world peace and racial equality.

Lowery spoke to about 300 worshippers at the Church of St. Mary in East Berlin, quoting the black poet Langston Hughes, who "called upon us to hold fast to dreams, for when dreams die, life is like a broken bird and cannot fly."

NAACP demands N.C. observances of King holiday

CHARLOTTE (AP) -- NAACP officials say they've "thrown down the gauntlet" in North Carolina cities this year, demanding a paid day off on Jan. 16 for municipal employees to celebrate Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday.

Dennis Schatzman, executive director of the North Carolina chapter of the NAACP, said his organization is taking a stand on the holiday because "Martin Luther King's birthday is an issue that should not be questioned."

"You don't have a better person to fight for than Martin Luther King," Schatzman said. "He is a man whose work was recognized by the Nobel Peace Prize Committee, a man of the magnitude of Mahatma Gandhi."

Last week, Lenoir City Council members also praised King. But they told local NAACP leaders the city can't afford another holiday.

In Lenoir, as in many other Piedmont cities, officials argue that an additional holiday for employees is simply too expensive. They propose giving employees the option of trading another of their holidays for King's birthday.

But Schatzman and other North Carolina black leaders say observing the King Holiday is a bellwether of racial attitudes.

"Because he (King) was black, people are fighting the holiday," Schatzman told The Charlotte Observer. "This is not to say that everyone who is against the King holiday is a racist. There are some economic concerns. But at least half of that is rationalization."

Most officials in cities that don't

"We in the church of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ must hold fast to the dream. We have made much progress in my country toward racial equality, but we still have a long way to go. In the struggle for racial justice, we will hold fast," said Lowery, an Atlanta minister.

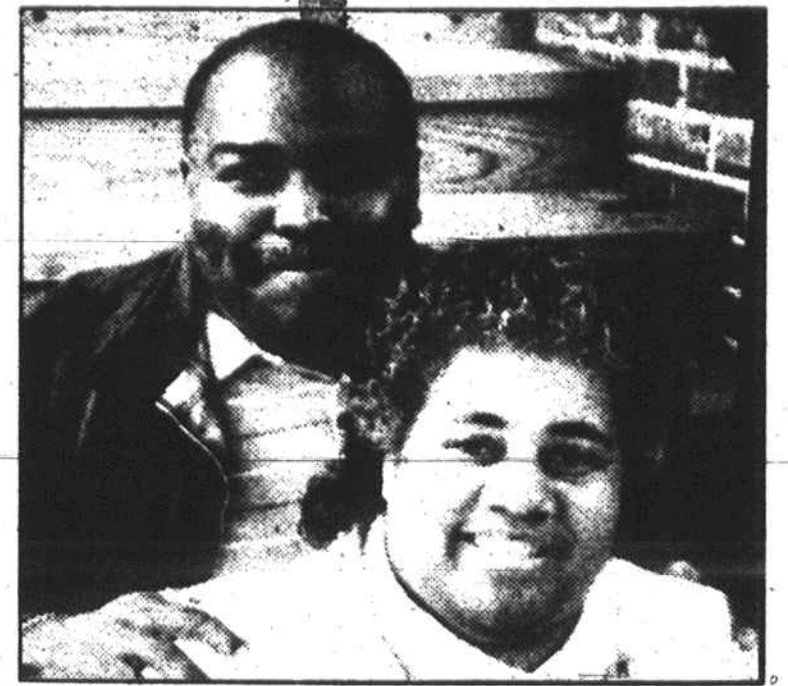
Lowery spoke in the same gothic-style sanctuary with 100-foot ceilings and ornate columns where King preached in 1964, and where the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy spoke in 1971. Both once led the Atlanta-based SCLC.

Lowery was in East Berlin to help

the German Democratic Republic Peace Council celebrate the 60th anniversary of King's birth.

King Week is a series of church services and special events leading up to the Jan. 16 national holiday honoring the slain civil rights leader.

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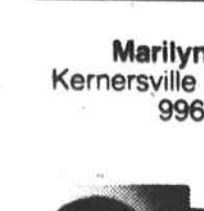
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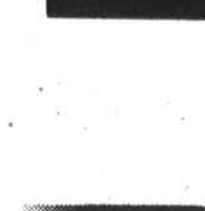
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