

The Southlake Journal

Serving Southlake and the Carroll ISD

Volume 15, Number 49

Friday, August 13, 2004

Southlake, Texas 76092

50 cents

Group in search of land for special needs community calls meeting

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Southlake Journal

Like the premise of the movie *Field of Dreams*, a group of people plans to take some undeveloped land in the country and build something wonderful.

The group, made up of local caregivers and parents of special-needs children, see a great need to create an open-area community for young and older adults with various types of cognitive challenges in the North Texas area.

Also like in the movie, they believe that "if they build it, they (people with special needs) will come."

The only hurdles they must first overcome is finding the 100 to 180 acres of land needed, as well as the land owners that are willing to either donate or sell it at a cheap rate.

Although this might seem like an overwhelming task, the group is encouraged by the initial response they have received and believe that such a community could become a reality in the near future.

"It's coming together a lot faster than we thought it would," said Amelia Dye, a Carroll Senior High teacher of Life Skills, a class for mentally and physically challenged students. "It's like it's meant to happen."

Dye, along with Tarrant County social worker Karen Dydek, is spearheading the nine-member group seeking to provide land for the special needs community. The group has organized and set a meeting for 7 p.m. on Aug. 23 at Carroll Senior High to discuss the initiative with residents from Tarrant, Dallas, Denton and Wise counties.

The group hopes that the meeting attracts 80 to 100 residents of the North Texas area, those that are either parents or caregivers of special-needs children or that own or know of available land. A presentation and discussion on how officials from Marbridge, a special-needs community south of Austin, will build and staff the facility if land is provided near the Metroplex will take place.

"We're approaching a variety of groups to come take part," said Dydek. "We're looking at locating land and that's our primary focus. Marbridge has specific guidelines on the kind of land they are looking for."

A trip to Marbridge this past May sparked initial interest in the project. Dye took a group of parents of special needs students to Marbridge, a 300-acre facility located in Manchaca, Texas, to visit a Carroll graduate who lives at the ranch-style community.

Parents also came to check out the facility as a possible place to send their children after graduation.

"They were totally floored by what a positive environment it provided for special-needs adults," Dye said. "But the only concern was that it seemed so far away to send them."

"So the question was asked, 'Why can't we start one here?'" she said.

The idea was presented to Marbridge and the response was promising. If a market analysis to be conducted shows there is a need and land is provided, officials from the community said that they would build and staff a similar community nearby.

If the requirements are met, "they are committed to building this," according to Dye.

Finding out whether or not Marbridge could fill a newly created facil-

ity with special needs citizens from the area is not a question, according to Dydek. Internet research has shown that there are tens of thousands of cognitively challenged adults in each of the four neighboring counties, she said.

"There's not a residential facility of this sort available in this area," said Dydek. "Marbridge thinks this would work out or they wouldn't have offered this as a possibility."

Dr. Sydney Bonnet knows the benefits Marbridge offers its residents. Her son, John, graduated from Carroll in 2003 and moved to the community soon after.

John, who desired independence as an adult but was not yet ready, saw living at Marbridge's ranch-like community as a chance to "go off to college." Learning life and job skills and feeling plugged into activities at the facility has been very beneficial for him, Bonnet said.

"It's been so wonderful for John," she said. "He's matured in ways that he would not have been able to if he had stayed here."

Bonnet said that parents of special needs children often find themselves "in a giant black hole" when looking at options for their kids after they graduate high school. Many of the choices are limited or, at best, unappealing, she said. Although there are some positive venues, such as opportunities to work and receive schooling, there are also many situations that they wanted to avoid.

"We always said that there was no way that we would ever put Johnny away," Bonnet said. "We didn't want to send him to a home."

Before Bonnet's family realized what Marbridge was, they thought it might be the type of facility that would isolate their son. When they learned what the community was all about, they realized that nothing could have been further from the truth.

"It would have been selfish for us to keep him from enjoying a great community to take part in. It took us awhile to realize that," Bonnet said.

Now he takes part in choir, interacts with other special needs residents at Marbridge and takes part in fishing trips and outings to Sea World.

If Marbridge were to create a similar facility just outside the Metroplex, Bonnet and her family would seriously consider moving John from his current location to the one nearby. However, John would have the final word, she said.

Either way, the creation of the community would be a great addition, she added.

"This is so needed," Bonnet said. "There are not enough opportunities for adults with disabilities. We have opportunities for kids with disabilities covered locally, but it's much harder for adults."

Bonnet will speak at the meeting on Aug. 23, telling her family's story and the blessing Marbridge has been to their son.

Dye said she hopes the information presented allows the group to network with parents of special needs children and find people willing to donate land or funds toward the cause. Land selected for the community must be near a hospital, near a city and retail developments (for residents that can work) and between 100 and 180 acres in size.

"We've got the need, we've got people who can be trained and we have the land to do this," Dye said.