Foster-home site in early stages
DeLays break ground, but not all neighbors welcome subdivision

By RAD SALLEE
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RICHMOND — House Majority Leader Tom DeLay and his wife, Christine, broke ground Sunday for a new kind of gated subdivision — a planned community of foster homes where, they say, abused and neglected children in Fort Bend County will be able to live like other youngsters.

The first phase of The Oaks at Rio Bend calls for eight houses on 30 acres of land, each home to six children and a trained professional caregiver, said Mary Clark, executive director of the DeLay Foundation for Kids.

Long-term plans envision a 50-acre facility with room for 240 children ages 5 to 17, Clark said. Access would be controlled for their protection, but the facility is not for juvenile offenders, she said.

"These children, who have been abused and neglected and taken from their home, are in many cases not adoptable and do not go back with their families, and end up in the foster care system," said DeLay, a Republican from Sugar Land who, along with his wife, has helped rear three foster children.

In some cases, DeLay said, the child ends up in a situation as abusive as in the home he or she was taken from. DeLay said that a child may live as many as 10 to 20 foster homes before being "emancipated" at age 18.

"Every time a kid is plucked from a home, they go through a grieving process as if their family had died," he said.

DeLay said this causes "attachment disorders" in which children may lose their ability to trust and love, and end up in prison or on the street.

The subdivision site is on a rural stretch of Pulsar Road near the Richmond State School in Fort Bend County. But because the ground was soaked with weekend rains, the groundbreaking was moved under a roof — to a horse arena at George Ranch Historical Park several miles away.

Joining the DeLays in wielding shovels was Lane Ward, chairman of the George Foundation board. Christine DeLay is chairwoman of the Rio Bend board of directors.

Clark said the George Foundation donated the land, worth about $500,000, and the DeLay Foundation has raised much of the rest of the $5 million donated so far. About $4 million more will be needed to finish the first phase, she said.

Clark said the facility, to be operated by Lutheran Social Services, will have an on-site assessment center to evaluate the needs of every child and devise "a plan for healing them."

"Not everyone is happy with the plan. Several nearby residents say they moved to the neighborhood to live in the country and fear that the subdivision will bring a host of teenagers with more than the usual share of teenage troubles.

"It's been kind of a little paradise," said Stephanie Wilshire, 64. She and her husband, Martin, keep eight horses, one cow and several dogs on their eight acres next to the subdivision site.

"We came out here to escape Houston's civilization and it was so peaceful and just wonderful," she said, "but it looks like that is about to change."

Wilshire said she is also sorry that in clearing land for the facility, contractors fell trees almost up to her property line. "This was a real heavy thicket with lovely trees," she said. "Now when people come up the road they can look right into our windows."

Her neighbor Alice Arndt, 62, said she is not opposed to having such a facility in the county but wishes residents had been given more information sooner. "It would have been smart to consult the neighbors and get us involved," she said.

Clark said that although formal notice was not given to nearby residents, plans for the project were discussed for more than a year in open meetings and covered by local media.