



Courtesy

Clarehouse is raising \$7.4 million to build and operate a 10-bedroom facility at 76th Street and Mingo Road.

Clarehouse fundraiser aims to serve the dying

► The group wants to raise \$7.4 million to build a 10-bedroom home.

By **KIM ARCHER**
World Staff Writer

Clarehouse has launched a \$7.4 million campaign to build a 10-bedroom home to care for Tulsans who are nearing the end of their lives.

"We take on the caregiver role and let the family just be a family," Executive Director Kelley Scott said.

Clarehouse now has eight bedrooms in rented space at the Park Plaza Apartments, near 51st Street and Sheridan Road. The 10-bedroom home will be built at 76th Street and Mingo Road.

Wendy Thomas, past president of the Clarehouse board of directors, said: "We wanted to increase capacity. That may not sound like much, but it is a 25 percent increase. We wanted it to stay small enough to keep the intimate family-like feel."

The money also will provide a three-year operations fund and a small endowment to maintain the build-

ing and its services, she said.

Of the goal, \$5.5 million already has been raised. Scott said she hopes that the rest will be raised in time for a June groundbreaking. The home is expected to take 10 months to build.

"It will be the next-best thing to being home," she said.

Clarehouse fills a unique niche by providing daily, round-the-clock comprehensive care to people in their last days or weeks of life, Scott said.

Many caregivers find it difficult financially, physically and emotionally to care for a loved one in their own homes, she said.

Clarehouse provides the home, along with 24-hour services, to make a person's last days comfortable, Thomas said.

On average, guests stay in the home for 10 to 12 days, she said.

"We are helping people who are not good candidates for long-term nursing facilities," Thomas said.

The nonprofit home has served more than 700 guests and their families since its inception in 2003, and no fees are charged, Scott said.

"More than 700 people have died under our roof, so we really know what it looks like," she said. "We see ourselves as guides along the journey."

The new facility will have bedrooms large enough for families to stay comfortably with their loved one, Scott said.

Each room will have its own patio with French doors wide enough to allow a patient's bed to be rolled outside. The home also will have a chapel, a labyrinth and a tub room with a lift to make it easier to bathe patients.

"Our whole philosophy is one of hospitality," Scott said.

The home will have a bed-and-breakfast feel, and patients will be allowed to bring their pets, she said.

Campaign Chairwoman Robin Ballenger said, "This campaign will help ensure that we have a permanent, stable, high-quality home for dying people in Oklahoma."

For more information about Clarehouse, the Welcome Home fundraising campaign or to donate, go online to www.tulsaworld.com/clarehouse.

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Lawmaker wants probe of AG

► But Edmondson says the Republican is simply attempting to cover for his "political cronies."

WORLD CAPITOL BUREAU

OKLAHOMA CITY — State Rep. Mike Reynolds asked the governor Friday to appoint an independent special counsel to examine some questionable campaign contributions made by the attorney general the past several

years.

Attorney General Drew Edmondson had used money from his own re-election campaign fund to contribute to other campaigns. Edmondson said last spring that when he discovered the mistake, he reimbursed his campaign.

Paul Sund, a spokesman for Gov. Brad Henry, said the state Ethics Commission "is tasked with regulating the issue in question, so there is no need to appoint a special prosecutor."

Edmondson announced last spring that Oklahoma County Commissioner Brent

Rinehart and his campaign manager, Tim Pope, had been charged with criminal felony counts of laundering campaign money and conspiracy.

After Rinehart and Pope were charged, Reynolds, R-Oklahoma City, accused Edmondson of making illegal campaign contributions.

The attorney general issued a statement Friday saying that Reynolds' request of the governor for a special counsel "is a blatant and pathetic attempt to give cover to his political cronies, Brent Rinehart and Tim Pope."

School advocates decry funding shift to roads

By **ANGEL RIGGS**
World Capitol Bureau

OKLAHOMA CITY — Lawmakers must decide on a proposal to pump more than \$200 million annually into the state's roads and bridges, although critics say it's pulling money from schools and other crucial needs.

House Bill 3342 by Rep. Mike Thompson, R-Oklahoma City, would divert about 30 percent of motor-vehicle taxes to transportation spending, rather than the state's general revenue fund.

The bill is headed for a vote on the House floor after being unanimously approved by the House Appropriation and Budget Committee this week.

Critics agree that Oklahoma's roads and bridges are in serious need. The disagreement is on the source of the money to fund repairs.

Thompson said this week: "It's an appropriate use of motor-vehicle fees to be used toward fixing Oklahoma's infrastructure. Currently, less than 20 percent of these fees are being used toward Oklahoma's roads and bridges."

Last year, motor-vehicle taxes contributed more than \$227 million to the state's general fund — the money lawmakers

appropriate to all state agencies.

Funds from motor-vehicle taxes also go to other areas, such as city and county roads, wildlife conservation and law enforcement retirement.

State transportation received \$1.79 million.

If the bill is approved, schools would still get their earmarked share of motor-vehicle taxes, which last year totaled \$218 million.

However, schools also get about 30 percent of the state's general revenue fund.

If the majority of motor-vehicle taxes no longer go to the state's general revenue fund, schools stand to lose about \$60 million, said Joel Robison, an Oklahoma Education Association lobbyist.

Although that might not sound like much for an agency that received nearly \$2.5 billion last year, schools don't have any extra money to offset the loss, Robison said.

It's not that roads and bridges don't deserve additional money, he said.

"It's just the way that the bill would take money from all other state services in order to fund them," Robison said.

Earlier this week the Oklahoma American Automobile

Association, the state's largest motorist group, endorsed the plan.

Chuck Mai, a spokesman for AAA Oklahoma, said it's time for the state to determine its priorities.

"If you look at Interstate 244 in Tulsa, it's a patchwork quilt of yearly repairs," he said. "We need to get serious about highway safety."

Thompson noted that "a large portion" of motor-vehicle taxes already are dedicated to education and other services.

"The Oklahoma Department of Transportation needs a continual revenue source that is consistent in order to deal with inflating steel, concrete and labor costs," he said.

If approved, the bill would be phased in, meaning that the amount that goes to the general fund would be reduced by 5 percent annually for six years.

"It would still take up to 10 to 15 years to catch up with even the most needed repairs and replacements in the state of Oklahoma," Thompson said.

"We are so far behind the curve, and we've neglected this system for so long."

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\$1 million gone, audit finds

► Marble City school funds allegedly went to buy land and a truck.

By **SUSAN HYLTON**
World Staff Writer

A state audit released Friday indicates that suspended Superintendent Larry Couch allegedly embezzled nearly \$1 million from Marble City Elementary School to buy land and a dually pickup and to pay his credit-card bills.

School board member Ramon Bolin said the sheer amount of public money that allegedly was misused over a 10-year period is what most gets his attention.

"We're a small school. We have 160 kids in pre-K through eighth, and the amount just is mind-boggling," he said. "You can't imagine that kind of money being taken out of a school and it's still functioning."

The state Auditor and Inspector's Office reports that an outside bank account was used to launder more than \$948,000 in school funds.

The funds came from school warrants payable to nonexistent vendors, meals for 3- and 4-year-olds, and funding from the Cherokee Nation for diabetes and obesity prevention and a Cherokee language-immersion program.

The audit cites the school for a lack of internal controls

MONEY TRAIL

The school funds allegedly paid for:

\$641,170 in credit-card bills held by Larry Couch, 55, of Vian and his wife, Carolyn Couch.

\$85,000 for land.

\$1,228 for personal indebtedness.

\$8,106 for miscellaneous expenditures.

\$161,157 for the use of a pickup and van not listed in the school's inventory.

\$10,408 for Couch's retirement.

In addition, the audit found that an invoice was altered to appear that one lawn mower instead of two had been purchased for \$12,552.

One of the mowers was in Couch's possession, in addition to a \$21,550 Kubota tractor, records show.

The mower and tractor returned to school property after the audit began, records show.

and inventory records.

It also found that two of the three school board members might not be eligible to serve because of their criminal records and failure to live within the district's boundaries.

Board President Mary Cooksey entered a plea of no contest in U.S. Bankruptcy

Court for an alleged attempt to embezzle monies from the Cherokee Nation, records show. Cooksey was defeated by Felicia Edwards in the Feb. 5 election.

Auditors confirmed that board member Tim Farris and his family live in Heavener, and not at the Sallisaw address he listed, which is within the Marble City district. He has two years left in his term.

The Sequoyah County district attorney asked for the audit after Bolin questioned a \$100,000 transaction that allegedly went toward the purchase of land that Couch and his wife bought from Jane and Kelly Nelson.

Bolin said Couch raises Limousin cattle on the land.

Couch admitted to authorities that he had "cooked the books" but had done nothing else wrong, records show.

So far, Couch has been charged only with embezzlement of public funds in Sequoyah County in connection with the land purchase.

Bolin said he wanted to suspend Couch in August when he was charged with embezzlement, but the other two board members would not go along with it.

Couch was suspended without pay in December after the state Board of Education revoked his teaching and administrative certificates. He is appealing that action.

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RSU-Pryor expansion expected to alleviate cramped confines

By **APRIL MARCISZEWSKI**
World Staff Writer

PRYOR — Rogers State University has been able to cram 350 to 400 students into four classrooms and a computer lab in Pryor by offering classes from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Come January, the tiny campus will be able to accommodate 800 students a semester.

RSU officials ceremonially broke ground Friday on a \$1.3 million, 7,400-square-foot expansion that will double the size of the branch campus.

The 2005 statewide higher education bond issue is providing \$750,000 for the project; the RSU Foundation raised \$250,000 in private donations; and the O.D. Mayor Foundation, which funds Mayes County projects, gave \$300,000 for the expansion.

The RSU Foundation is raising \$100,000 more for computer equipment, science-lab equipment and furniture for the additional five classrooms, five offices, computer lab, restrooms and commons area, college officials said.

Construction is expected to be finished in November.

At the Pryor campus, students take general education classes and can complete two-year degrees in business administration, said campus Director Sherry Alexander.

Rogers State University Pryor Campus



RSU considers the campus a good starting point for students, who can finish their four-year degrees at the main campus in Claremore.

Most students are from rural towns, and many are the first in their families to go to college, Alexander said. The small campus makes for an easier transition from their small high schools.

At RSU-Pryor, they learn to succeed in their classes and navigate the college system.

RSU President Joe Wiley said the campus is also a "god-send for adult learners who are place-bound and can't afford to go anywhere else."

Megan Ballou, a third-year student who spent her first two years at the Pryor campus, said, "Many students wouldn't attend college if it weren't for the Pryor campus."

Ballou would have gone to college one way or another, but she is glad she was able to save gas money and continue to live in Pryor while in college, she said.

The small campus did not feel much different from high school, and Ballou got to know all of her professors.

Ballou is looking forward to the campus expansion so that the classes she needs will be available there and so that the facility will be less crowded and more wheelchair-accessible. She sometimes uses a wheelchair after she lost her leg in a traffic accident in 2004.

RSU President-designate Larry Rice, who lives in Pryor



Courtesy

Rogers State University will begin construction this spring on a 7,400-square-foot expansion of its Pryor campus.

and started the branch campus in 1986, said the school's goals are quality education, economic development and

enhanced quality of life in Pryor.

Wiley, who is leaving to be a college president in Tennes-

see, said RSU is working with Google and Gatorade at the Mid-America Industrial Park in Pryor to learn what degree programs they need and what internships they might be able to offer students. Degrees that RSU adds in Pryor will be focused on the needs of the community.

The expansion also will allow the campus to offer all freshman- and sophomore-level general education classes, he said.

Sen. Sean Burrage, D-Claremore, attended the groundbreaking ceremony and said, "Investment in higher education is the single most important thing we can do for economic development in Oklahoma."

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