

Thursday, February 21, 2008

28-acre mini-Great Park coming

The Great Park "preview" will cost about \$14 million.

By CAMERON BIRD and ELYSSE JAMES
STAFF WRITERS

Driving around the old El Toro Marine base today, there's not much to see. Abandoned buildings, dirt, and piles of wood greet visitors to the one tangible piece of evidence of a Great Park – the big, orange balloon.

In the next 18 months, park planners intend to give Orange County residents something else to do besides ascending and descending 250 to 400 feet aboard the gondola of the orange orb.

The 28-acre area surrounding the Great Park balloon is being called a "preview park," and will incorporate some aspects of what the park will be someday.

The balloon, which began operating in July, will have night flights starting this summer. White and orange-tinted lights will add illumination to the balloon as it rises. Lights and reflective striping have to be added along the road to the balloon before night flights begin.

The preview park will be developed in three phases, concluding with a ribbon-cutting ceremony in July 2009, said Great Park Corp. spokeswoman Marsha Burgess. The Design Studio has until the end of the year to submit designs, so plans for each phase have not been finalized.

The first phase should be finished by July, Burgess said. This coincides with the third anniversary of the park dedication, said Michael Taylor, project manager at the Design Studio.

Lead architect Ken Smith, said the park will include a 3,000-square-foot egg-shaped building known as a 'pod' that might replace the tented 2,500-square-foot visitor's center. The pod will house restrooms, ticketing booths for the balloon and possibly a food vendor, and will be the first in a series of multi-purpose structures, Smith said.

The preview park will also include the beginning of what will eventually be a palm-tree lined walkway with games such as chess, mini-golf and lawn bowling.

In November, the Great Park board budgeted \$14 million for the preview park. The preview park is part of a multi-year budget and is not locked into a particular fiscal year, said Kurt Mowery, manager of finance for the Great Park Corp.

The budget for the next fiscal year, which starts July 1, has not been finalized, he said. A budget will be given to the Great Park board in May and to the Irvine City Council in June.

Lennar, the company building housing near the park, is working on the first phase of infrastructure and development plans, said spokeswoman Carol Wold. This includes roads, sewers and electricity that must be put in before the buildings. The housing downturn has slowed the process, she said.

For more information, visit www.ocregister.com/greatpark.

Contact the writer: 949-553-2911 or ejames@ocregister.com 949-633-9050 or birdcameron@gmail.com

Three phases of building the preview park

Phase I: One soccer field, picnic areas, drought-tolerant grass, restriping parking lot and adding signs.

Completed by: Summer

Phase II: Water, electricity, irrigation upgrades, adding plants, possible display of Lockheed PV-1 Ventura airplane.

Completed by: December

Phase III: First part of a timeline path that eventually will stretch diagonally across the park, citrus groves to flank the entry road, 3,000-square-foot structure to house park amenities.

Completed by: Summer 2009

Preview park costs:

\$225,000 for timeline, banners and displays.

\$280,000 for parking area, shuttle service.

\$325,000 for signs and lighting.

\$375,000 for shaded areas, audio visual screens in balloon area.

\$585,000 for benches, tables, shaded areas, trash cans, picnic areas, performance space.

\$1.1 million for project requirements, nursery and agriculture, inspections, soil samples, an operations trailer and permits.

\$1.2 million for mockups, park studies, night balloon flights and lighting, airplane collection.

\$1.9 million for tents and portable restrooms.

\$2.2 million for landscaping, lawn area, cleaning the hangar, fencing.

\$2.5 million in reallocated funds.

\$3.3 million for design, engineering, construction, program costs.

El Toro base history

March 17, 1943: Marine Corps Air Station El Toro commissioned.

July 2, 1999: El Toro base closes.

March 5, 2002: Voters pass Measure W, eliminating planned airport use.

March 6, 2002: Navy announces it will sell the base.

April 2002: Navy adopts a non-aviation reuse plan for the base.

Dec. 5, 2003: First Great Park Corp. board meets.

Feb. 16, 2005: Lennar Corp. buys base for \$649.5 million.

Jan. 23, 2006: Ken Smith's design team chosen.

July 14, 2007: Balloon opens to the public.