

Friday, June 6, 2008

After 6 years and \$54 million, O.C.'s Great Park offers little

Critics want project put on fast track; developers say construction can't be rushed.

By **SEAN EMERY** and **CAMERON BIRD**
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

IRVINE - Great Park leaders have spent six years promoting ambitious visions of a majestic, 1,300-acre central park, where military runways, hangars and chain-link fences are transformed into expanses of sports fields, eye-catching natural landmarks and cultural gathering points. But in the same six years, the only attraction open to the public – an orange balloon ride – is closed down.

Officials said that new attractions are around the corner, such as the first portion of a 27-acre preview park, which will open on July 12. But Great Park leaders have decided to focus on selling the vision of the park and envisioning the project – mainly through the creation of a detailed master plan – rather than moving forward with construction of the park.

Keeping the Great Park in the public eye has come at an increasing cost. Through glossy brochures, public outreach and community events, more than \$6 million has gone into city, Great Park Corp. and Great Park Design Studio strategic planning and public-relations efforts so far, according to city records and interviews with park officials, with proposed spending expected to add approximately \$2 million more.

But city officials were unable to provide exact details on where portions of outsourced public-relations funding have gone, including more than \$350,000 earmarked for community presentations.

A recent Register investigation also found that most of the \$2.2 million spent by the nonprofit Great Park Conservancy has gone toward publicity and public education. The conservancy, which is not in charge of planning or running the park, has raised \$2.8 million since 2000.

Park leaders say the public-relations work is needed to update the public on a \$1.1 billion project designed to be comparable with San Diego's Balboa Park, San Francisco's Golden Gate Park and New York's Central Park.

Councilman Larry Agran, chairman of the Great Park board of directors, defended the public-relations spending, which he prefers to call public information work. With the park having spent \$54 million as of Feb. 29 – and \$63 million in proposed spending expected in 2008-09 – public relations remains a small piece of the Great Park's finances, Agran said.

"Given that this park will build out on the order of \$1.1 billion, is it unreasonable to spend \$1 million a year to inform the public?" Agran asked. "If we're going to tell an accurate story of what is happening, we have a duty to invest in public information."

But critics question why so much effort is going into selling the public on a park that doesn't yet exist.

"It's one thing to do outreach, but we have done that over and over," said Councilwoman Christina Shea, a member of the park's board of directors. "We need to build a park."

A TASTE OF THE PARK TO COME

Park leaders hope the project will turn a corner in July, when the first portion of a 27-acre preview park is slated to open. Agran said the park in August and September is also expected to host dances every Friday night and performances every Saturday night.

The Great Park on July 12 will also see the return of the balloon ride, which was grounded in February after allegations of safety violations. No safety violations were proven, but inaccuracies in the flight permit paperwork prompted the Federal Aviation Administration to pull its permit.

"This area is going to come alive," Agran said of the preview park opening. "People will see that not only is design underway, but in limited ways actual creation."

Some worry the actual creation of the park isn't progressing fast enough. Shea questioned a public-relations push directed at more than 300 city, county, sports and nonprofit organizations, arguing that the project is behind schedule and Great Park leaders should focus on construction.

"We can't afford to frivolously spend right now," Shea said, pointing to the recent housing crisis, which some fear could affect needed developer fees. "Does it mean the park won't happen? No, it doesn't. It means we have to be more fiscally responsible."

PUBLIC RELATIONS TAKES CENTRAL ROLE

Outreach has long been central to the Great Park campaign. Leading the way has been Newport Beach-based Forde and Mollrich, which received yearly \$600,000 contracts from 1999 to 2005 to provide public relations and strategic planning services as local leaders annexed the El Toro property, worked with Lennar Corp. to get the Great Park land, and chose the park's designers.

The Great Park Corp., which oversees the creation of the park, has its own in-house public-relations staff, which focuses on public events, such as the preview park opening, and projects such as documenting the historical transition from El Toro to the Great Park.

The corporation public-relations team spent \$1.4 million from 2005 to 2007, according to budget documents. The corporation expects to spend approximately \$940,000 on public relations during the current fiscal year, and is proposing nearly \$1.7 million in public-relations spending during the upcoming fiscal year starting in July.

The Great Park Design Studio, hired by the corporation to create a master plan for the park, has its own public-relations staff and a \$27.3 million agreement with the corporation that began in January 2007. It includes a \$1.14 million contract with Forde and Mollrich. The firm focuses on community presentations, monthly mailers and media relations.

CONTRACT MANAGEMENT

From the beginning of its January 2007 contract, Forde and Mollrich planned to deliver 200 to 300 presentations, according to public records. But despite repeated records requests, officials could not provide a complete list of Forde and Mollrich's work to date.

Under Forde and Mollrich's contract with the Design Studio, \$399,657 has been allocated for custom-designed presentations.

Sam Allevato, hired by the consulting firm last June to serve as a Design Studio-embedded spokesman, leads the effort to present stakeholder groups, community organizations, public agencies and individuals with PowerPoint-driven previews of what's to come at the Great Park.

Invoices indicate that as of February, the firm had spent \$359,771 – or about 90 percent – of the total presentations contract. Invoice narratives obtained by a public records request provide a partial list of presentation recipients: including the California Fire Museum; the Irvine Police Department; the Irvine Sports Committee; Cal State Fullerton Media Department; and delegates of Hermosillo, Mexico, Irvine's sister city.

Unlike other Design Studio subcontractors, whose spending is kept in check by a product management and construction firm called Bovis Lend Lease, Forde and Mollrich reports directly to Great Park Corp. spokeswoman Marsha Burgess.

"This is not a typical way of managing a communications budget," said Burgess, adding in an e-mail that she is tasked with reviewing the public-relations contract because she "is most familiar with the work ..."

The assessment, Burgess said, is left to her judgment and Forde and Mollrich's internal budgeting.

"(They) know how much (they) have to work with," she said. "They only have so much money."

DEVELOPMENT ON HORIZON

With the park's designers slated to complete their detailed plan by the end of the year, Great Park leaders hope to begin work on sports fields, a park entrance and garden areas by the beginning of next year, Agran said.

Great Park board member Walkie Ray acknowledged that some have become impatient with the project's pace, but cautioned against moving too fast.

"It would be politically expedient to build something right away, because that would deal with the public's desire for something they can see and use," Ray said. "But we need to make sure the plan is proper, and will lead to the best result before they put spade in the ground."

For those who wanted to get sports fields and community areas into the park right away, this long-term approach has proved frustrating.

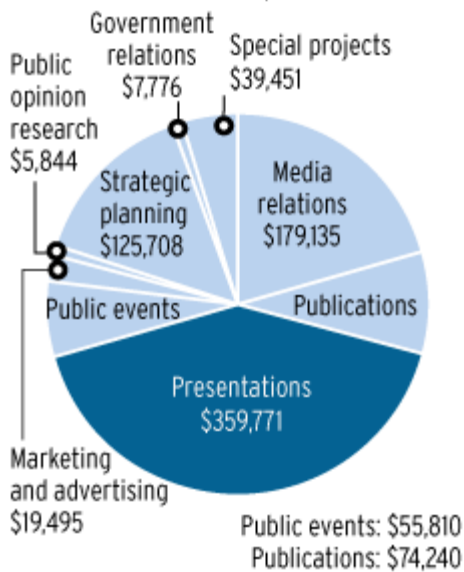
"You go up in this balloon and what do you see?" asked Dick Sim, a former Irvine Co. executive who resigned from the Great Park board. "Three million tons of concrete."

Contact the writer: 949-553-2911 or semery@ocregister.com

CHART

Design Studio spending

Here's how the Design Studio divided up its \$867,231 public outreach budget between January 2007 and February 2008.



Source: Design Studio invoices

The Register

Lay of the land

The Great Park will span 1,347 acres in central Orange County, making it nearly two times larger than New York City's Central Park.

The immense project, built on the site of the former El Toro Marine Corps Air Station, will boast a sustainable mix of natural habitats and interactive features including wetlands, a carved-out canyon, bridges, sports fields and a walkable timeline of the site's history.

Three mixed-use neighborhoods, from which property taxes will stream in to help fund the park, will stand on the fringes.

Before a park was promised, Orange County residents rejected a plan to convert the site into a heavily trafficked international airport. Debate over the competing plans lasted for a decade.

Timeline

June 27, 1993: The federal base closure panel decides to close El Toro by 1999.

March 5, 2002: Voters pass Measure W by 58 percent to 42 percent, eliminating the planned airport uses at El Toro.

Nov. 12, 2003:Local Agency Formation Commission votes 5-2 to allow the city of Irvine to annex the 4,700-acre base property, which includes a 1,000-acre parcel that will remain under the jurisdiction of the Federal Aviation Administration.

Dec. 5, 2003:The inaugural Great Park Corp. board meets.

May 27, 2004: Great Park Corp. hosts the first in a series of symposiums on how the Great Park might be developed.

Feb. 16, 2005:The Navy's auction of El Toro ends, with Miami-based Lennar Corp. buying the base for \$649.5 million.

July 12, 2005:Lennar pays the balance of \$649.5 million total due to the Navy and takes over ownership. The company also presents the first check to the city of Irvine of the \$201 million in developer fees for construction of the Great Park.

Jan. 23, 2006:Ken Smith's design team is picked by the Great Park Board to create the park's master plan.

June 20, 2006:The Orange County grand jury releases a report on the Great Park titled "The Orange County Great Park: Whose Park Is It?" and subtitled "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The report says that the city has betrayed the public trust by assuming control of the Great Park and that the county should consider suing to regain some authority.

July 25, 2006:The Irvine City Council votes unanimously to accept the Lennar Corp.'s gift of an orange helium balloon for the Great Park. The 72-foot-wide balloon will carry about 25 people at a time 500 feet above the former El Toro Marine base.

Oct. 12, 2006: Ken Smith's design team releases the park's draft master plan. Revisions to the design reveal for the first time how the 1,347-acre park and its neighboring housing developments and commercial projects will interact. Notable among the new details: the announcement of a main entrance to the park at Trabuco Road, marked by fountains and a 300-foot-wide gate.

March 1, 2007:Ken Smith's design team releases a total park cost estimate: \$1.1 billion.

July 14, 2007:The big orange balloon opens to the public.

Aug. 9, 2007:The Great Park Board approves a \$27.3 million contract to continue the work of Ken Smith's design team for one year.

Sept. 27, 2007:Comprehensive master park plan is unanimously approved by the Great Park Board.

February 2008:Great Park balloon is grounded while FAA investigates alleged safety violations. No safety violations were proven, but inaccuracies in the flight permit's paperwork prompted the FAA to pull the permit.

Upcoming:

July 12, 2008:Great Park leaders are planning to celebrate the third anniversary since the park's approval with the opening of the first portion of a 27-acre preview park and the return of the balloon ride.

More online

- Find numerous documents about the Great Park, including contracts and correspondence, at www.irvinequickrecords.com.
- Join the conversation on the Great Park by clicking on this story at www.ocregister.com/Irvine.

Great Park's promotion

A story on the status of the Great Park was posted Friday on our Web site, www.ocregister.com/irvine.

Great Park leaders have spent six years promoting ambitious visions of a majestic, 1,300-acre central park, where military runways, hangars and chain-link fences are transformed into expanses of sports fields, eye-catching natural landmarks and cultural gathering points. But in the same six years, the only attraction open to the public – an orange balloon ride – is closed down.

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Readers commented:

I think its great. People need green spaces for rest and relaxation, much like Central Park is a haven in nice weather and a great break among the city, this would be a nice break from crappy tract homes. – xseanx

Waste of money. – omgrukidding

Although the Great Park leaders are mentioned several times in the story, I fail to see the leadership. – tothepoint

They closed down the pretty orange ballon? *tears* – whereismymind

Are you kidding me? \$54 million / 6 = \$9 million a year for nothing. Hello! \$1.7 million for just a year of PR on a park that doesn't exist? This is so obvious what's going on here and I'm glad you did some reporting about it Register. I predict that this park will never get built. – 1503er

Sounding more and more like "The Great Boondoggle" – domingo

Isn't the fact of the matter that Lennar officials can't afford to drive to the site since gas is up to \$4.40 a gallon? – suvguy

They should have gone with the airport in the first place. – justintyme

I just moved to a part of Irvine neighboring the socalled "great park." I had heard a lot about it and was excited to see what it looked like. What a disappointment. I feel their promotions of it are misleading. I don't care about what you think it will look like years from today. Focus on actually building the thing, then wake me up when it's done. – socal78

Change the name to The Crappy Park. Problem solved. – johncoktostone

Should've built the airport. We could have been flying in and out of there by now. – canman

If you want Central Park, move back to New York.– cynicalcitizen

I thought I read something about a water crisis a couple of days ago. I just can't wait for them to do more development without regard to infrastructure, traffic, water and electricity in California. Good thing we all like paying more for basic needs. – daddoe

Boy did Agran and his cronies pull the wool over everyone's eyes. He pushed the NIMBY button and everybody in South County just fell into line. We could have an operational airport creating jobs and revenue for the last six years. All we have now is an unsafe hot air balloon. – naptown

Was, now and always was a "Music Man" type scam. Great Park, my eye. It is all about profits and greed. – Plumbob62

These guys are just wasting the people tax money and going nowhere. We all should vote to shut them out! – hondo555

Should have built the airport? No! Won't fly! First of all, the residents of South Orange County wouldn't permit it — and they still won't. – timscavo

A least it is not an international airport. It would be LAX south. – orwellian5

Comment at the bottom of any online story at www.ocregister.com/irvine.

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One of the abandoned buildings near the Great Park balloon site.

MIGUEL VASCONCELLOS,
ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER



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HANGAR TIME: U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer, center, gets a tour of an old hangar from Irvine council member Larry Agran, left, and mayor Beth Krom, right, during a visit to the Great Park in Irvine last week.

FILE PHOTO: EUGENE GARCIA, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER



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The Great Park Balloon at sunset.

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