



## Articles & Trends

### Nature Prevails

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By Terence Loose

After years of controversy, community activism and ballot counting, the time has come to break ground at the former Marine Corps Air Station at El Toro and build Orange County's Great Park. What a difference half a decade can make. Travel back to the late 90s and you'd find a county divided over the reuse of MCAS El Toro: whether it would be a place where jumbo jets took off or swallows landed. Newport Beach residents, mostly pro-airport, were pitted against anti-airport south countians in no-holds-barred battle that made "The O'Reilly Factor" seem tame. But after all the shouting-and more than a few ballot measures-the people got their turn to speak.

They sided with the birds.

But it was more of a vote of what not to do than a proposal of a master plan. It took time for a real vision to take shape: a Great Park surrounded by modest development and open space.

Now, with New York-based architect Ken Smith beating out a field of international firms in a competition for what he sees as the job of a lifetime, the community's vision is finally about to become reality. Of course, "about to" is a relative term; many say the Great Park will take decades to complete. But, they hasten to add, that's the point - if it could be built in a day, it wouldn't earn its name.

At 1,347 acres, the Great Park will be more than twice the size of New York's Central Park (and unlike Central Park, which was originally built on the city outskirts, it will be the center of the new community). But it's not merely the size that has its designers and creators feeling the pressure. "Next to the ocean and the beaches, this will be the most important thing in our area. So there's a ton of pressure to do it right. Everyone will be second-guessing us," says Pat Fuscoe, head of Irvine's Fuscoe Engineering and the man who's in charge of making all the lofty dreams and schemes actually work. He's been involved in the planning since just after the final ballot initiative defeated the airport plan in 2002, and he says what drives everyone is the feeling that they're creating something for generations to come. In fact, because of the need for phased construction, it might take that long to build.

And though Fuscoe, with others, will determine what is financially and geographically possible, there is no doubt that the Great Park will be more than just a big park. Plans are for it to include, among other things: a 300-acre sports park (probably in the first phase); a museum district; possibly a library; and the component that won Smith's team the job - a two-mile canyon that would feature real airplanes as interest pieces.

If this sounds expensive, it is. The current park budget is \$401 million, paid for through fees from the surrounding land's developer, Lennar Corporation, which brought the 4,000 acres of El Toro air base land at blind auction last February for \$650 million. Out of that, approximately 2,000 acres will be developed by Lennar, featuring housing, schools, retail, etc. - all surrounding the Great Park.

But Smith says even when creating his presentation to get the job-a time if ever there was one to not worry about budget - he took cost into consideration and was "very strategic." "Take the canyon," he says. "In Landscape design, the least pensive thing to do is planting and moving earth. So we've incorporated as much as we can in that area. The canyon is a good example." Hardscape and hard features (fountains, courtyards, etc.) are normally more expensive, so Smith says he incorporated those things sparingly.

Most important to Smith is not the “wow factor” but a park that speaks both to the past and the future of Orange County. He points to his plans for orange and avocado groves as a nod to Orange County’s agricultural past; to the fact that his design calls for incorporating pieces of the El Toro air base runways and aircraft in homage to the land’s most recent use; and finally to the 200-acre multi-sport sports park (everything from baseball and soccer to tennis and badminton) as a reflection of the growing diversity of the county.

If anyone doubts the dedication and ability of this New Yorker to tackle the challenge, Smith wants to put their minds at ease now. He plans to open an office on the base and spend almost half his time in the OC over the next several years. “This is a big part of Orange County’s future,” he says. “There’s a real long-term aspect to this.”

This is why the buzz word is sustainability. “Our motto, put forward by Bob Santos [president of the Lennar Great Park project] is “Progressive but Proven,” says Fuscoe. He rattles off a few examples: More than four million cubic yards of concrete from existing runways will be used for roads or deposited underground to promote drainage; parking lots will incorporate soft porous concrete and pavers, also to promote drainage; all green waste will be mulched and recycled throughout the park; recycled water will be used for lakes, creeks and watering. Fifty thousand trees. Energy-efficient buildings. The list is endless.

Orange County Great Park Corporation CEO Wally Kreutzen, the man charged with making this all happen, says he’s marching to the same orders. “We’re planning for the next 100 years. Most projects plan for the next 25,” he says. And Kreutzen who grew up in Fullerton in the late 1950s, knows first-hand how unpredictable and different the distant future can be. “I’m from a generation who went for a drive after church on Sundays,” he says. He and his family would drive south to San Diego, a journey that took most of the day along Pacific Coast Highway. Back then, the drive was mostly open fields and beaches, dotted only sporadically with small towns. “South of Santa Ana, there wasn’t much,” he says. But he saw a population boom like few others - for a time, Fullerton was the fastest growing city in America. “Now, the only space is the military land at Camp Pendleton,” he says.

And he doesn't see it stopping. With sun 330 days a year, great beaches and a growing cultural sophistication, people are always going to want to live here. "The population will go up," he says. "So, if I were able to come back in 100 years, I wouldn't be surprised to find the entire coast lined with high-rises."

Which only makes the need for a Great Park - a place where people can get away, breathe, relax, and play, that much greater.

John Sullivan, a Great Park Conservancy director, echoes those thoughts. "A park is a public space that celebrates what we see as valuable - a place to escape our daily pressures," he says. In an attempt to see how other great parks did that, he took a "European park tour" in the summer of 2004. He and his wife attended a London conference entitled "Great Parks, Great Cities," then put their walking shoes on. They visited 38 parks in five countries: England, France, Holland, Germany and Spain. He saw how each park reflected its citizens, and was most impressed with parks he found in Holland and Germany.

One was the Duisburg Nord Park in Germany, an example of the reuse of industrial land -not unlike El Toro. The park was built between 1991 and 2000 on land that was the site of defunct industrial complexes. This history was incorporated, however, by leaving the "skeletons of industry" as the main attraction, says Sullivan. Machines and rusting structures are now permanent exhibits.

The park does have a unique green aspect too. "The designers weren't sure what plants would flourish in this environment," says Sullivan. "So they planted a large variety and then allowed nature to reclaim the land." Essentially, any plants that seemed to do well, they encouraged; those that seemed ill-fitted to survive, they let die. The result, says Sullivan "really shakes your senses. Trails of vines climb water towers and trees sprout up between metal towers."

Another park that grew out of reclaimed land is Amsterdam's Bos Park. In the late 1930's, park architects decided to plant a forest. "That took 50 years of patience," says Sullivan. That patience is now paying off. "It's truly breathtaking and highly functional," says Sullivan. Among the trees is a vast sports complex with rowing channels, cricket fields, riding trails, and a host of other sports. The result is a true escape from the surrounding city. Sullivan hopes the people of Orange County have this kind of vision and patience.

It's a tall order, but Fuscoe, at least, thinks we have the right team in place - especially the man at the top, Bob Santos. He tells a story about Santos, when Fuscoe worked under him at The Irvine Company in the 70s - a time when no one would buy a home east of the 405. The pair worked together on Woodbridge, then a brand new community. But the stigma of being so far from the ocean seemed impossible to overcome. "So Santos had the idea of putting a lake in," says Fuscoe. They risked it.

It sold out in days. "Because of him, I have no doubt the Great Park will be amazing."

Ken Smith agrees, and probably sums it up better than anyone: "This has to be a truly great park," he says. "Once we settle for a good park, we're lost."

For more information on the Great Park, visit [www.ocgp.org](http://www.ocgp.org).