

Balloon site still under construction

Since July 14, the orange balloon has carried more than 20,000 people in almost 1,000 flights.

By **SONYA SMITH IRVINE WORLD NEWS**

Designers want to make the orange balloon attraction more enjoyable by possibly adding benches, meadows and more shade.

The balloon opened to the public 52 days ago and now designers plan to expand the attraction by delivering a proposal to the board in late October. The balloon has now been used by more than 20,000 people and construction continues on the original site plans.

The balloon and temporary visitor's center opened July 14 and has so far drawn 23,091 riders from as far away as Florida. That includes 5,920 children and 17,171 adults in a total of 983 flights.

The original 2006 balloon design and construction estimate of \$3.6 million rose by \$1 million because of a reduction in Lennar Corp.'s contribution, added design features, the decision to buy rather than rent the white tent for the visitor's center, and the construction contract going above estimates. The balloon's first year of operation is expected to cost \$957,600.

Here's a breakdown of the balloon's construction and design progress:

CONSTRUCTION

Cal-Pac Engineering Co. was the winning bidder for the project April 19. The company was the lowest of five bidders – at \$2.67 million – to build a landing pad, parking lot and a temporary visitor's center for the orange tethered helium balloon.

The firm originally had until July 14 to finish the project, but was given an extension to Aug. 10 for some design features added in May.

Christina Templeton, Great Park Corp. manager of engineering, said for a previous article that getting the balloon ready in time for the July 14 opening was "a huge accomplishment" but said the construction company is still finishing work on some of the design features and making some minor corrections to the attraction area.

Great Park staff has said that construction on the site is ongoing.

DESIGN

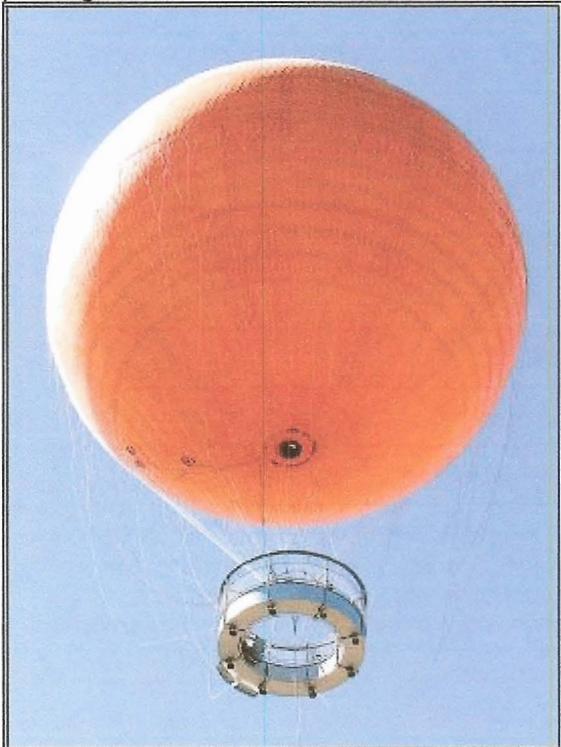
Lead park designer Ken Smith said he's proud of the balloon, but he's also used it as a "useful learning experience."

Smith has said he'll be relieved when the construction is finished – so visitors will see his real design intentions rather than a "raw" site.

He said at Thursday's Great Park board meeting that his team is working on plans to make the balloon attraction "more comfortable."

Among his team's ideas: add parking closer to the balloon for persons with disabilities and seniors, either

replace or add to the current shade structures, add lighting for special functions at night, start flying at night, possibly fly up to as high as 1,000 feet – rather than the current 400 feet, add a playground or maze for children, add a giant chess board where people can move the pieces around, add outdoor performance areas, add picnic areas, restore an old hangar next to the balloon and add military displays, possibly have the Lennar Corp. add a bicycle shop so people can rent bicycles to ride around the base, and add more trees, meadows and other plantings.



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