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Disappearing equestrian options puts pressure on the Great Park

Park leaders haven't discounted an equestrian center, but must first find space for a proposed facility.

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IRVINE – Horse riders facing the likely loss of several high profile Orange County venues are questioning why a long-hoped for equestrian center wasn't included in the recently unveiled Great Park comprehensive design.

Local leaders say an equestrian center is likely still on the Great Park horizon. But the equestrian plans are on the backburner, as officials try to find the space needed for a world-class facility.

Enticed by the open acreage and existing trail access provided by the Great Park, nearly a dozen groups have expressed interest in the high profile project, hoping to preserve an equestrian lifestyle threatened by rapid urbanization.

Preliminary studies released last year by the Great Park Design Studio noted that the scale of the equestrian facilities could range from simply providing trail access and staging areas for horses, to boarding facilities or even a full-scale venue for horse shows.

Great Park leaders say the sheer amount of acreage needed for an equestrian center is their biggest hurdle. The most likely fit for the facility would be within an additional 131 acres Irvine officials are hoping to pick up from Lennar Corp. as part of an updated development agreement the city is negotiating with the developer.

"I'm enthusiastic about equestrian possibilities," said Councilman Larry Agran, who serves as the park's chairman. "It's just a question of timing and the availability of land to make it possible."

Some park leaders say equestrians have mounted a renewed push for the Great Park following the recent announcement that the Orange County Fair Board is studying whether to turn a 7.5-acre equestrian parcel into a parking lot.

The long-term future of the county's other major equestrian venue, the Oaks Blenheim/Mission Viejo Riding Park, is also uncertain. The riding park recently received a three-year extension, but is ultimately expected to close or move to make way for the Rancho Mission Viejo development.

The possible loss of key venues, as well as the pressure placed on smaller stables by increased development and tighter environmental standards, has horse enthusiasts worried, said Sam Allevato, a Great Park Design Studio spokesman. Allevato also serves as a council member in San Juan Capistrano, one of the county's few remaining equestrian strongholds.

"This isn't just about trying to propagate your sport, it's more in the terms of survival mode for horses in Orange County," Allevato said.

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Some equestrians faced with the loss of facilities at the Orange County Fairgrounds are looking to the Great Park for a new home. In this Register file photo, Viva Medina, 48, of Newport Beach kisses her horse Mailani, 7, at the equestrian center of the Orange County Fairgrounds. Medina has been boarding Mailani here for 4 years. She doesn't know where she'll go if the center closes.

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