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El Toro experience a model for base closures

Representatives of agencies redeveloping old bases learn from local closures.

BY SONYA SMITH IRVINE WORLD NEWS

Planners, consultants and engineers toured the old El Toro and Tustin bases Monday for a little bit of inspiration.

The tours were included in the Association of Defense Communities' weekend conference in Newport Beach. The conference brings together people and agencies working to redevelop military bases.

"Control your destiny. You're not here to please the Navy," said Allison Hart, a former Irvine city manager.

She and Councilman Larry Agran spoke to an audience of about 100 on how the closure of El Toro base was turned into plans for a Great Park with surrounding private development.

In 1993 the base went on the national base closure list and was closed in 1999. After 10 years of fighting over the land's future use – a park won over an airport. But, after the Great Park plan won the Navy Department announced an auction of the base land.

"Everybody scrambled for days and weeks trying to figure out what that (auction) meant," Agran said.

Hart said the city's negotiating with the Navy to set up the auction so four parcels of land could be sold – each with value – allowed the Navy to make money (\$649.5 million), the winning bidder (the Lennar Corp.) to buy land for development (residential, commercial and industrial), and the city to use developer-required payments (\$402 million) to build the Great Park.

It was making lemonade out of a potential lemon, Hart said.

The Tustin base also was auctioned away – 235 acres sold for about \$208 million to the team of Lennar Homes and William Lyon Homes.

Several in the crowd Monday said they may or may not follow the El Toro example. Each situation is unique and requires a different solution, said people from Maine, Alabama, Northern California, Georgia and other states.

But, the El Toro situation was an inspiration to some of the participants.

"What we're seeing here (at El Toro) is fantastic. It's tremendous and we just hope our redevelopment won't take 10 years," said Fred Bryant, executive director of an agency redeveloping Fort Gillem in Forest Park, Ga., on the southwest edge Atlanta. The base is expected to close in 2011 and of the 4,027 acres; the community hopes to receive about 1,000 acres.

After the presentation Monday, Bryant told participants around him how he wants his base redevelopment to be seen as an example like El Toro. "That's going to be me up their someday" he said.

MORE ONLINE

For more on the Great Park, go to www.ocreger.com/irvine and click on the "Great Park" section.



MIGUEL VASCONCELLOS / IRVINE WORLD NEWS

Great Park Corp. Chairman Larry Agran speaks to members of the Association of Defense Communities about the transformation of the old El Toro air base for public and private use.