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Future of Great Park, e-mail privacy may go to voters

Irvine council unanimously directs city attorney to draft 2 ballot measures for Nov. 4 election.

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IRVINE – Voters may get the final word on the direction of the Great Park and increased city e-mail privacy restrictions.

The City Council this week asked that ballot measures on both high profile issues be drafted for possible inclusion in the November election.

City leaders unanimously directed the city attorney Tuesday to draft the two ballot measures, which still require final council approval before they can be placed on the Nov. 4 ballot.

The Great Park measure would seek resident support for a number of key decisions made by the Great Park Corporation and the City Council over the past three years regarding the park's governance, financing and development.

The measure would allow residents to weigh in on the direction of the park, said Councilman Larry Agran, who also serves as chairman of the Great Park Board.

Agran said the measure would include a number of projects already approved by the Great Park Corporation, including the balloon ride and a 27-acre preview park, the first portion of which opens Saturday.

Agran suggested that residents also weigh in on the city's 2006 decision to keep development of the Great Park directly under Irvine control. The Great Park Corporation is led by nine board members – five Irvine council members and four at-large appointments – and essentially serves as a department of the city.

A Grand Jury report in 2006 criticized the decision not to create an independent Great Park Corporation, arguing that it turned what had been conceived as a county park into an Irvine project. A divided council rejected the Grand Jury's findings, which Agran described as a "thinly-veiled scheme to turn over the whole operation to the county supervisors."

Councilwoman Christina Shea said she would be happy to re-visit the council's decision to retain direct control of the park, arguing that it had "gutted a firewall" set up to protect city assets.

"I'm excited about getting into this debate in November," Shea said.

The second ballot measure would tighten Irvine's public records policy, after the release of thousands of e-mail and mailing addresses raised fears that residents' personal information could fall into the wrong hands.

A city attorney report released this week determined that some e-mail addresses may be withheld if the public interest in disclosing them is outweighed by the public interest in keeping them private. Other experts have argued that it would be difficult for the council to bar the release of e-mails and e-mail addresses sent to and from the city, which are generally covered under the California Public Records Act.

The e-mail debate began in May, when Agran questioned a public records request by Shea for "all e-mail addresses available to the public that have been created by (the) city." Shea in her request said the e-mail addresses would be used for sending out an electronic newsletter, but has since offered to return them to the city.

Similar requests for public e-mail records were made by officials from the Great Park Conservancy in 2005 and the Great Park Design Studio's public relations team in 2007. City officials responded by releasing more than 31,000 e-mail addresses and 186,000 mailing addresses, including some culled from correspondence regarding city classes and community services programs.

"No child, no family should be subjected to the invasions of privacy that are so commonplace now," Agran said.

Agran argued that voter backing of a tightened e-mail release policy would strengthen the restrictions. The council unanimously directed the city attorney to draft a ballot measure for later approval, but some questioned if the restrictions would hold up in the face of a legal challenge.

"It's not that I'm in opposition to this, it just seems very general," Shea said.

The council has until Aug. 8 to decide whether to place the measures on the Nov. 4 ballot, city officials said. The last scheduled council meeting before the deadline is on July 22.

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