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*From the Los Angeles Times*

### **Great Park Grounds Will Need Scrubbing**

**Toxic substances must be removed and tons of concrete hauled off the base before Irvine can make its 1,300-acre dream come true.**

By Jean O. Pasco  
Times Staff Writer

January 25, 2006

With the naming of a master designer this week for the Orange County Great Park, supporters are a gleam with its potential. Now comes the hard part: dealing with toxic leftovers at the former El Toro Marine base in Irvine where the park will be located.

About 900 acres of concrete and asphalt runways must be pulverized and carted away. As much as 700,000 pounds of toxic substances may have seeped from an aging sewage system, and soil and groundwater were fouled by industrial solvents, pesticides and jet fuel dumped during the base's 56 years of operation.

Federal environmental officials in 1990 named El Toro one of the nation's most contaminated military bases and still consider portions of it Orange County's most tainted land.

"Unfortunately, it's inevitable that they're going to find problems" once the bulldozers start to work, said Greg Hurley, an environmental attorney and longtime member of a citizens panel formed by the U.S. Navy to assess environmental cleanup at El Toro.

"They keep saying it's like Central Park in New York City or Balboa Park in San Diego, but it's not," he said. "Those were pristine areas. This is a very different animal. I hate to be the specter of doom, but it's time to inject some reality in the process."

To be sure, officials say the challenges are surmountable. The Navy is already well underway on a \$300-million cleanup of the base, and the city of Irvine is confident the park will be safe by the time it opens.

The Navy has an obligation to deal with the contamination and has repeatedly assured the city that it will keep that promise, Irvine Councilman Larry Agran has said. "If the cleanup takes three, five, even 20 years, they will provide the funds that are needed," he said.

On Monday, the Orange County Great Park board voted 7 to 1 to select New York landscape architect Ken Smith as the master designer. It was the last major hurdle before work begins in earnest to design and build the \$401-million park.

The 1,300-acre park will be at the center of a huge residential and commercial development built by giant homebuilder Lennar Corp., which bought the former base last summer from the Navy for \$649.5 million. The company deeded land for the park to the city of Irvine and will build 3,400 homes and 3 million square feet of commercial space on the rest of the property.

The centerpiece of Smith's design for the park is a 2-mile-long canyon to be sculpted alongside the base's longest runways — an ambitious undertaking that will involve moving 5 million cubic yards of earth at an estimated cost of \$14 million. In other areas, Smith plans to create a series of streams.

Park designers acknowledged the challenge this week when they spoke of restoring wildlife habitat and waterways at the damaged property. Smith's design team includes Steven Handel, an ecology professor at Rutgers University in New Jersey who specializes in reinvigorating "disturbed places."

Irvine's chief park planner, Glen Worthington, warned the park board last month of the potential problems. "There is a possibility when we're building the lake or the canyon or reflecting pools that we may run into environmental contamination," he said.

But, he added, "we do have the fact that the Navy had a base there and they're doing their best effort."

To date, the Navy has certified as clean and turned over to Lennar 2,795 acres of the roughly 3,700 purchased. The rest, with known or suspected contamination, will remain in the Navy's hands until it is clean or the military has a plan to decontaminate it.

"In general, the Navy has done a good job of cleaning up these sites," said Kathleen Johnson, chief of site cleanup for the Environmental Protection Agency's western region, based in San Francisco.

"In general, they're pretty aware of what's contaminated, and we have other mechanisms in place to make sure there's protection in the long run."

Most of the known pollution at El Toro involves solvents, pesticides and fuel that seeped underground.

The largest area of contamination sits above a 775-acre chunk at the base's southern end where sports fields are planned. About half of that land sits atop a plume of groundwater contaminated with trichloroethylene, a solvent used to clean planes, that was discovered in 1985.

In 2001, the Navy signed an agreement with the Irvine Ranch Water District to contribute nearly \$30 million toward cleanup of the plume, a task expected to stretch to 2045.

Other smaller areas of contamination are expected to be cleaned within three years at a cost of at least \$70 million, according to Navy estimates. They include a six-acre site near the runways where benzopyrene was found, a nine-acre former construction dump near planned homes, and two hazardous-waste landfills that will be capped and declared off-limits.

One remaining unknown, however, is the condition of El Toro's sanitary sewage system, with 26 miles of unreinforced clay pipes fanning across the base. The Navy disclosed in 2000 that 9 million pounds of solvents were dumped over the years into the porous pipes.

Federal law requires the Navy to clean up any additional contamination found once the redevelopment reaches full swing. But there is no deadline for completing the work, nor is there a guaranteed way to pay for it. The money from the sale of the base went toward cleaning up all closed military facilities, not just El Toro.

At other closed bases throughout the country, the discovery of new pollution has created problems.

The Northern California city of Alameda's efforts to redevelop a closed naval air station there have stalled for nine years. The base closed in 1997 — two years before El Toro — but new pollution problems have delayed the transfer of the property.

"It's pretty common that as the process goes along, you find more contamination than you thought," said David Brandt, Alameda's assistant city attorney, who has worked on the base transfer. "It just makes everything take longer."

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