

Thursday, December 1, 2005

Great Park may shrink

Some designers, board members are pondering the lower cost and higher appeal of a smaller project.

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IRVINE WORLD NEWS

Might the Great Park shrink a bit?

At about 1,347 acres, the planned park would be one of the biggest metropolitan parks in the nation. Too big perhaps, some are saying, and too much to build even in the originally contemplated 20-year window.

Moreover, Great Park Corp. planners now acknowledge the \$401 million in developer fees Irvine will collect likely won't be enough to build all of the originally planned park. That leaves several alternatives:

Seek grants or other revenue sources to build all that has been planned.

Defer development decisions some sectors of the planned park

Shrink the parkland area and develop more of the old base land.

The Great Park is envisioned as a trend-setting, post-industrial park, a meld of houses, shops, schools, businesses and other development that would help provide a revenue stream to support the wilderness areas, athletic fields and other public places.

Lennar Corp. won the bidding for the 3,740-acre old air base, and as part of the agreement with the city, agreed to deed over the acreage for the park-lands and pay \$401 million in developer fees.

If the Great Park board decides to shrink some of the parkland, those acres first would need to be rezoned for something other than public space. The size of the 1,347-acre public park was negotiated between city officials and the Navy after Orange County voters passed Measure W in March 2002 to transform the base into a large park, with areas dedicated for housing, businesses and education. A move to reduce the parkland almost certainly would ignite a spirited debate.

"We questioned the grandiosity of the Great Park from the beginning," said Reed Royalty, president of the Orange County Taxpayers Association.

Yes the park is expansive, but its success "comes down to how you design the park," says board member Christina Shea. But economics may guide the discussion. Great Park planners have pledged to make the park self-sufficient, but they concede the expected developer fees likely will fund only a first phase of the park. Part of the challenge is dance-floor flatness of the area. All three design finalists' plans include extensive - and expensive - land contouring, such as the creation of a canyon, lake and wetlands.

A smaller park could mean more space available to build housing, which falls far short of demand in Orange County. Only about half the number of housing units needed to keep up with job growth in the county are being built, says Jeff Myers, a real estate expert with Irvine-based St. Clair Myers Partners.

While a smaller public park might be more attractive and less costly, the politics of making that decision now clearly would be difficult at best. Some board members are talking instead about deferring decisions on some of the parkland.

"We might want to start out building a terrific small park and leave some land for future generations to develop," says board member Michael Pinto. "We could just leave some land to fallow or allow agriculture to use it."

No one has yet put hard figures on how much Great Park land might be held over to future development or what an

extended build-out timetable might be.

Transportation habits also may factor into the debate over park size.

Lennar cites studies showing that people are reluctant to walk more than a quarter-mile between park attractions. In all three design finalists' plans, the distances between some elements are greater than that. That will tend to discourage people from staying for multiple activities and thus using the parks' restaurants, shops and other revenue-generating facilities.

"A smaller park makes sense," says Jack Camp, who heads a Laguna Beach design firm and lead a design jury that evaluated the seven design finalists. "It's wonderful to have all this land, but there is an economic factor involved."

Besides the \$401 million it agreed to pay in developer fees, Lennar paid \$649 million to acquire the 1,873 acres it will develop. Some Great Park parcels are designated for use by a variety of state and federal agencies.

All three finalist design plans consider various transportation schemes to connect the park's attractions with the developed areas of the park. Cars are relegated to outlying parking lots, part of the direction from the Great Park board to the designers.

But that concept also is being rethought. People are going to want to park closer to the places they visit, said board member James "Walkie" Ray.

Lennar says the challenge of Great Park will be to "fill in the gaps" among the natural elements now proposed, including the wildlife corridors, athletic fields, meadows and bikeways and the developed features such as an amphitheater - "connectivity," as Bob Santos of Lennar calls it. Santos is the executive in charge of the Great Park project; he says the finalist designer plans give the basics but "absolutely" will have more elements added.

And some of those elements likely will be commercial - eating places, shops or attractions not yet conceived.

That's been the experience at post-industrial-age parks built elsewhere in the world. A park in Germany, for example, incorporated parts of an old steel mill building into the design of the park.

Shaving acreage off the Great Park public lands will make a barely perceptible difference in the county's park acreage.

According to the county figures, park acreage in the county is about 44,000 acres - the equivalent of 32 Great Parks.

Some answers to the Great Park questions of how much, where, when and how will start to take shape later this month, when the board is expected to choose a master designer, ending a long quest for a vision for the park but opening perhaps a bigger challenge of how it will be built.