

Is the Great Park too great?

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

By JEFF ROWE
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Great Park might get a bit smaller.

At about 1,350 acres, the proposed Great 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. And, the \$401million in developer fees Irvine will collect likely won't be enough to build all of the park.

The Great Park Corp., which is responsible for its development, probably will have to seek grants or other revenue sources to build all that has been planned. As planners' dreams of the park have become more concrete



"GREAT" EXPANSE:
The site of the

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over time, they have realized costs will escalate. Some parts of the park's development might have to be deferred.

The Great Park is envisioned as a trend-setting, post-industrial park, a meld of houses, shops, 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 3,700-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 decided to shrink some of the parkland, those acres would first need to be rezoned to be used for something other than public space. The size of the 1,350-acre 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.

Great Park planners have pledged to make the park self-sufficient, but planners now concede they might need more than the developer fees, which will fund only a first phase of the park. Part of the challenge is the flatness of the area. All three design finalists' plans include extensive –and expensive – landscaping, such as canyons and lakes.

Some designers and Great Park board members are wondering if a smaller park might be more attractive and less costly. And while it would require a zoning change, slicing off a bit of the planned parkland could mean more space available to build housing, which falls far short of demand. Orange County is building only about half the number of housing units it needs to keep up with job growth, says Jeff Myers, a real estate expert with Irvine-based St. Clair Myers Partners.

Some Great Park board members also are talking about deferring decisions on some of the parkland to future generations. 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, but the cost and challenges of creating the park on such a flat, arid space is challenging even for the designers.

One incentive for a smaller park is transportation habits.

future Great Park is the decommissioned El Toro Marine Corps Air Station. "It's wonderful to have all this land, but there is an economic factor involved," said Jack Camp, who led a design jury that evaluated the seven design-firm finalists.

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What's next

The Orange County Great Park Corp. board meets at 9 a.m. Dec. 12 and at 10 a.m. Dec. 15 to discuss selection of a designer from the three finalists, among other things. The board meets in the council chambers at the Irvine Civic Center. Information: ocgp.org

Lennar cites studies showing that people are reluctant to walk more than a quarter-mile between 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 leads 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.

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.

Downsizing the park surely would be politically difficult. Skeptics from the beginning have been critical of the meld of development and traditional park functions; they would howl at allocating more area for development. "We questioned the grandiosity of the Great Park from the beginning," said Reed Royalty, president of the Orange County Taxpayers Association. "Mainly people were voting against the airport."

Yes the park is expansive, but its success "comes down to how you design the park," says board member Christina Shea. "It can't be too big - it's how they treat it," said Ray Watson, a long-time Irvine Co. executive who was chief planner in the early days of developing Irvine and parts of surrounding cities included in the Irvine Ranch.

Shrinking the park area would be an unpopular idea, said Larry Agran, chair of the Great Park Corp. board. Perhaps more likely would be an agreement to defer decisions on parts of the park until later - perhaps much later.

"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."

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.