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Grand jury: County should control Great Park

A Register editorial

The Orange County Register

The Orange County Board of Supervisors should heed the advice of a newly released grand jury report and "consider legal action to return control of the Great Park to the people of Orange County."

The report, part of the grand jury's civil oversight function rather than its criminal indictment function, focused largely on the April 25 resolution adopted by the Irvine City Council, which wrests financial control of the park from the Great Park Corporation Board of Directors. After that action, "the Orange County Great Park has morphed into the 'Irvine Great Park,'" the report says.

This Great Park heist, as we have called it in past editorials, is "incompatible," the grand jury said, "with the intent of Measure W," the countywide vote that scuttled the previous plan to turn the closed El Toro Marine Corps Air Station into an international airport. Measure W adopted a land-use plan consistent with building a Great Park on the site. Advocates for the park consistently called for this to be a countywide park, enjoyed by residents throughout the county and managed by officials throughout the county.

Now, the grand jury notes, "Control of the Great Park is maintained by a three member bloc on the Irvine City Council. ... By relinquishing control of the Great Park, the Orange County Board of Supervisors helped contribute to the loss of countywide participation."

The City of Irvine annexed the park land last year, and thus, council members say, the city bears ultimate responsibility for the park.

Apologists for the council majority insist that the April 25 vote did not really change the way the park was meant to operate. The grand jury report suggests otherwise, explaining that the Great Park Corp. was reduced to an advisory organization following that vote, and that the new structure invites potential problems. For instance, it asks how an Irvine City Council member might act if the interests of Irvine and the interests of the park conflicted.

The grand jury also questioned the no-bid park contracts that have been awarded by the Irvine council majority. It points to a \$1.4 million payment to a public relations firm, another no-bid contract to a legal firm "at a significantly higher hourly rate" than the previous firm, and yet another no-bid contract – granted on the same day the council took control of the park finances – to a recycling facility.

The Board of Supervisors, which called on the Irvine council to rethink its April 25 decision, needs to do more than say "pretty please" to an Irvine council hell-bent on total park control. It should follow the suggestions of the grand jury and look for legal ways to reassert county control over a park that is meant to benefit the entire county, not just a small Irvine elite.