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GREAT EXPECTATIONS

BY NOW, KIDS WERE SUPPOSED TO HAVE BEEN PLAYING IN IRVINE'S GREAT PARK. WHY THE DELAY? PAGES 3, 5

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COMING SATURDAY: COVERAGE OF FIRST LADY LAURA BUSH'S VISIT TO IRVINE

Irvine's Great Park takes baby steps

After seven years of brainstorming, banquets, community forums and informational newsletters, the nonprofit conservancy helping transform the tired El Toro Marine base into a thriving Great Park has put aside just \$570,000 – for a botanical garden.

The garden will likely cost at least 100 times as much, according to the group's chairman.

The traditional mission of private conservatories is to raise big bucks for the care and feeding of landmark parks. But the Foundation for the Great Park's main mission is publicity and public education.

Formed in 2000 to oppose a commercial airport at El Toro, and now known as the Great Park Conservancy, it distributes newsletters and e-mail blasts, maintains a Web site, hosts increasingly expensive fundraisers and touts the park to at least two civic groups each week.

“When there’s not a park to conserve yet, what does a conservancy do?” Executive Director Carol Simon asked. “Let people know there’s going to be a wonderful park, while at the same time growing support for it. Public education has been a large part of our work in the early years.”

The conservancy is a small piece of the \$1.1 billion Great Park puzzle, which some feel isn’t fitting together quickly enough. In 2002, voters nixed a commercial airport on the base in favor of a majestic, Central Park style “democratic space.” In 2003, Irvine officials said that children would be playing in the county’s largest sports park within three years of El Toro’s sale.

It’s clear now that was a fantasy. The three years are up July 12. Most of the Great Park is still surrounded by chain link fences. Giant military runways still stripe the ground. There is no sports park.

The one attraction that has launched – a big orange balloon ride – was grounded after allegations of unsafe flying practices. Officials hope it will return to the sky in July, when five acres of a 27-acre “preview park” are slated to open.

The Great Park Conservancy is not in charge of planning the park, or of running it. Those powers belong to a different, nonprofit subsidiary of the city of Irvine, called the Great Park Corporation. The corporation formed years after the conservancy was born, but the conservancy works mostly in its shadow.

The conservancy has raised \$2.8 million since its founding in 2000, and spent \$2.2 million, mostly on publicity and public education. The amount spent on its main mission has fallen below the bar set by the Better Business Bureau for the past two years, while fundraising spending climbed sharply, tax returns show.

MAIN MISSION

This dive in core-mission spending, Simon said, is because the conservancy’s new “Jewel of Orange County” fundraisers – where attendees dine alfresco, bid on fine jewelry and watch acrobats – are classified solely as fundraisers rather than as program services on its tax returns.

“The Jewel event has become a way for us to focus and educate the public about the park. That’s a big part of our strategy,” Simon said. “It helps bring on board communities like Newport Beach, that didn’t initially support the park. If you consider that public education, then our program services number jumps to over 80%.”

Irvine Councilwoman Christina Shea said she feels that a much larger portion of the conservancy's funds should go to long-term savings for the planned botanical garden, which will cost \$50 million to \$100 million.

But the need is obvious to the conservancy's Simon. "We find all the time people close and far who still don't know about the Great Park," she said. "If there is redundancy, it may not be enough."

Great Park Conservancy

A review of seven years' worth of tax returns for the Great Park Conservancy shows that:

The amount spent on its main mission of public education has dropped. Efficient charities spend at least 65% on core programs, but the conservancy spent just 32% in 2006, and 49% in 2007. Officials said that's because its "Jewel of Orange County" fundraisers – which are actually public-education efforts – were counted only in the "fundraising" column.

The drop in program spending coincided with a leap in fundraising spending, to 52% of expenses in 2006, and 38% in 2007. Again, officials said that's due to how "Jewel" was categorized.

The efficiency of fundraising efforts has dropped. In an earlier year, \$ 1 spent on fundraising returned as much as \$32. But in 2007, it returned \$3.47. Officials said "Jewel" events net 50%, which is "pretty phenomenal." Young organizations often net only 1 0% on such events.

The conservancy spent more than it raised in two of the seven years reviewed. The conservancy had enough cash to cover the shortfalls.

About \$90,000 has been spent on travel, conferences and community forums over seven years, including a fact finding trip to Europe.

Included in its program spending is about \$40,000 for promotional items such as Great Park T-shirts and key chains.



Quentin Chen, 2, drives his car into the Great Park during a preliminary master plan exhibition.
> MIKE SCHWARTZ/STAFF

BY TERI SFORZA STAFF WRITER

“

We have spent millions and millions of dollars promoting something that, in my mind, we could have started building. I don't see the need for a big PR push. We need to roll up our sleeves and build the park.

Christina Shea,
Irvine Councilwoman

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