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Great Park Balloon will rise again in July

The helium attraction was grounded by safety allegations; FAA cleared it, and night flights will start this summer.

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THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

The Great Park Balloon will be aloft again this summer after being grounded since late February.

The tethered helium attraction will relaunch on July 12 and introduce night flights from 7 to 10 p.m., said operations manager Rod Cooper. The balloon's rise will be the centerpiece of the "Festival of Flight," a celebration of the third anniversary since the Great Park's approval. Evening concerts and other special events will be featured at the balloon site throughout the remainder of the summer.

Great Park officials hope the festival will mark a triumphant return after the balloon was investigated by the Federal Aviation Administration. Jonathan Bradford, a former balloon pilot employed by contractor Aerophile, alleged unsafe practices by balloon operators including flying higher than 500 feet and flying with less than the FAA-required five miles of visibility.

Officials grounded the balloon while the FAA conducted an investigation; no safety violations were proven, but inaccuracies in the flight permit's paperwork prompted the FAA to pull the permit. The Great Park Corp. had to resubmit its application.

A new flight permit was finalized on May 15 and improved record-keeping has been instituted, but Great Park officials have opted to keep the balloon grounded so contractors can begin working on the Preview Park, a 27.5 acre site that will surround the balloon. The site will be a small fraction of the Irvine park's planned 1,347 acres at the former El Toro Marine base, but officials hope the area will give the public a feel for what's to come.

The Preview Park will include a 5-acre lawn area, tables and umbrellas—"a place for picnics and kicking a soccer ball around," Cooper said. An old hangar will be spruced up and turned into a café; a stage will be erected outside for entertainment. An egg-shaped visitor's center, dubbed a "pod," will also be featured. The project will be completed in 12 to 18 months, Cooper said, and will be unveiled to the public in stages.

Balloon admission will remain free for the foreseeable future, Cooper said. While the Great Park board agreed last year to explore the use of ads at the balloon site to raise revenue, Cooper said the focus has shifted to acquiring corporate sponsorships from local companies. The Great Park Design Studio recently hired a consultant charged specifically with generating sponsorship possibilities, Cooper said.

Once the balloon is aloft again, rides will be available Thursday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., and from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. Cooper said the winds tend to be highest in the early evening hours, so the balloon will stay moored during that time.

The Great Park Corp. has continued to pay balloon operator Aerophile, honoring the \$380,000 annual contract even as the balloon has been grounded. But Cooper said the balloon, which has remained inflated while moored, needs daily monitoring, routine maintenance and must be moored differently depending on daily weather conditions.

The balloon operator also worked with the FAA to create new record-keeping procedures and manuals, which will include photographic evidence of daily visibility. Visibility is determined by visual landmarks including Loma Ridge to the north and Signal Peak to the south; at night, the lights near the old Tustin hangars are among the cues used to determine adequate visibility.

While the 5-month grounding came as an unexpected setback to the Great Park, officials say the balloon attraction is improved.

"We were happy to make the changes suggested by the FAA because they were in everyone's best interest," Cooper said.



UP, UP, AND AWAY: Customers ride the Great Park Balloon over the former El Toro Marine Corps Air Station.

FILE PHOTO: BRUCE CHAMBERS, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Balloon passengers since July 2007: 41,368

Maximum height reached: 500 feet

Minimum visibility for flight: 5 miles

Acreage of balloon site and surrounding Preview Park: 27.5

Total cost for design and construction of balloon site: \$4.6 million

Projected budget for construction of Preview Park: \$13.9 million

Balloon operator's annual contract for 2007-08: \$380,000