

Thursday, February 21, 2008

# **Great Park balloon ride safety violations alleged**

## **Former employee of balloon operator sends letter to FAA.**

By ELYSSE JAMES  
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

IRVINE - A former employee of the company that runs the Great Park balloon has sent a letter to the Federal Aviation Administration alleging "unsafe behavior" at the balloon.

The letter is from Jonathan Bradford, who has been identified in previous news stories as the co-pilot of the orange orb. Bradford says in the letter that he worked for BalloonVision from July 2007 to January.

The letter accuses BalloonVision, a subcontractor of the Great Park Corp. and operator of the balloon, of flying the balloon without the FAA-required five miles of visibility on more than one occasion, of operating the balloon with less than the recommended 1,000 feet between the top of the balloon and the lowest clouds and of taking the balloon past its height limit of 500 feet to 610 feet on two occasions. The first time was to test the length of the cable, the letter alleges, and the second was with "Irvine city council members as well as high level people at the Great Park" on board.

To Mayor Beth Krom's knowledge the balloon had never gone higher than 400 feet during the times she was aboard. "In my experience," said Krom, who had not seen the letter, "we've been very conservative grounding the balloon any time when it should not have been flown."

She said she didn't know of any incidence when the balloon went beyond the 500-foot limit.

The Great Park balloon was cleared to fly only up to 500 feet by the Federal Aviation Agency just two weeks before its launch in summer of 2007. A waiver from the FAA was needed because of the balloon's top altitude of 500 feet, according to Register reports.

The balloon, filled with 5,500 cubic meters of helium, is hoisted up and down by 410 feet of steel cable which is attached to an electrically powered winch.

There is one pilot to control the balloon from its on-board control panel, and a co-pilot manning a second control panel on the ground in case the on-board system fails, according to Register reports.

An air speed indicator perched on top of the balloon helps determine if flying conditions are safe, Operations Manager Rod Cooper told the Register in a previous story.

The letter alleges that Cooper and the balloon's chief pilot, Gary Stevens, were informed of the safety risks but that conditions set in the FAA waiver for flight were being ignored.

"I don't think the city has ever been accused of putting the health and safety of individuals at risk and I don't believe that actions would have been taken that would have done so in this case, but we'll continue to watch what happens," Krom said.

City spokesman Louie Gonzalez said that the city is working to determine the validity of the allegations and will hire an independent investigator to look into the matter.

He said the issue may have been between a disgruntled employee and his company, which is a contractor with the Great Park, but, he said, "If there are any deficiencies we will address them and change things as necessary."

Great Park Chairman Larry Agran said he had not seen the letter.

Great Park spokeswoman Marsha Burgess said she had no comment now, and Great Park interim CEO Sharon Landers could not be reached.

**Contact the writer:** 949-553-2911 or [ejames@ocregister.com](mailto:ejames@ocregister.com)