

Wednesday, March 26, 2008

Great Park balloon to remain grounded

FAA investigation finds no proof of safety violations, but unearths administrative errors in permit.

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THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

The Great Park balloon will remain grounded even though a former employee's allegations of unsafe practices could not be proven.

An investigation by the Federal Aviation Administration found no safety violations, but did unearth some administrative errors in the permit issued to fly the balloon. The permit was revoked March 7 and the Great Park Corp. must apply for a new one with accurate information and updated safety requirements, said FAA spokesman Ian Gregor.

The balloon hasn't flown since Feb. 24, when the Great Park Corp. grounded it so the FAA could conduct an investigation after former co-pilot Jonathan Bradford's allegations to the government agency.

Bradford, who worked for the Great Park Corp. as a contractor to balloon operator Aerophile, alleged that the orange orb was flown without the required five miles of visibility; that the balloon had been flown past the height limit of 500 feet; and that the balloon was operated without the 1,000 recommended feet between the top of the balloon and the lowest clouds.

"We thoroughly investigated the allegations that the former employee made, and were unable to corroborate these allegations," Gregor said.

As for the administrative errors, Gregor said the permit named a former employee as the person responsible for the balloon's operation, and "Heritage Fields" is the responsible company named on the permit. Rod Cooper is the current operations manager, and the Great Park Corp. is the responsible company; "Heritage Fields" is the name of the housing and commercial area that will be developed around the Great Park by homebuilder Lennar.

The Great Park Corp. has reapplied for a permit, but it will include new safety provisions that should have been there originally, Gregor said, including a

standardized training manual for all balloon operators; better record-keeping practices; and better measurement of cloud ceilings and visibility.

Gregor said that Great Park officials have been “very cooperative” throughout the investigation and indicated a willingness to comply with any additional safety requirements.

Louie Gonzalez, a spokesman for the city of Irvine, said the investigation proved the balloon's operations were safe.

“We understand that FAA has no concerns about the safety of the balloon, and it's now about administrative corrections that need to be done and improvement of procedures in operating the balloon,” Gonzalez said. The Great Park Corp. has already reapplied for a new permit, which is pending, he said.

The Great Park Corp. also commissioned an independent aviation expert to conduct a review of the balloon's operations; those results should be received soon, Gonzalez said.