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Great Park leaders OK a development plan

Project's timeline and cost is still uncertain.

By **SEAN EMERY**
STAFF WRITER

IRVINE – Great Park leaders on Thursday backed a vision for the first wave of park construction focusing on a sports park, bosque, entry gate and cultural terrace in the western portion of the former El Toro base.

With a detailed master plan expected by the end of the year, the Great Park board of directors' decision is meant to provide a road map for park development.

The Western focus also reflects changes in Lennar Corp. construction plans, which have shifted away from housing developments and toward the Lifelong Learning District, a mix of educational buildings and commercial space expected to break ground this fall.

The timeline and price tag for Great Park construction is still uncertain, with runway and building demolition, as well as mass grading, required before any projects can move forward. But Great Park leaders say construction on some amenities could begin as early as next year.

Local leaders asked Great Park staff to fast track the opening of sports fields, hoping to have at least a portion of the facilities open within 18 to 24 months.

Park officials are crafting the final layout of the sports park. Some are pushing for the inclusion of up to 22 soccer fields, hoping to turn it into a national venue. Others are backing a "sports village" approach, with a mix of fields, retail and lodging.

The board earmarked about \$1.8 million for further study of the sports park, aviation museum, visitor's center, fire museum, agriculture and food uses and art and culture programs. Great Park leaders also agreed to fund a new study of the cultural terrace, which will encompass several of the park's most prominent and costly projects, including an amphitheater, botanical garden, library, multicultural center and national archives facility.

Great Park leaders are looking to private partners to fund further study of the cultural terrace projects, as well as a water science park, community organization center, demonstration garden and portions of the sports park.

"It is time for partners to step up, or we have to face the reality that these projects, while we may study them, have to be put on the shelf," said Councilman Larry Agran, chairman of the board of directors.

Private and nonprofit organizations have stepped forward to back some projects, with the Orange County Children and Family Commission expected to assist with the community organizations center and the Great Park Conservancy pitching in with the demonstration garden.

Other partnerships are in the pipeline, with several community organizations expressing interest in helping with the multicultural center, a partnership of Wild Rivers and the science museum pushing for the water science park, and Live Nation executives offering to back the amphitheater.

The board decided to delay further planning of an equestrian center, noting that the large amount of space needed to accommodate it requires further discussion with Lennar.

Staff is expecting to deliver an in-depth financial study of the Great Park plan in August. In the meantime, Councilwoman Christina Shea, a Great Park board member, urged caution in projecting construction timelines, pointing to the amount of park infrastructure work still required.

"We need to look at all these designs and features with our business plans," Shea said. "I want to make sure we are very sober in how we approach this."

Contact the writer: 949-55.-2911 or semery@ocregister.com