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Great Park pays 285k to find ways to get money

Officials hope fundraising plan will eventually net \$22 million in private support, aside from money another group is already raising.

By SEAN EMERY
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

IRVINE – Great Park leaders on Thursday agreed to pay a consultant up to \$285,000 to put together a fundraising plan that officials hope will eventually net \$22 million in private support for iconic park projects.

The contract with Chora, LLC essentially calls for the consultant to create a strategic fundraising plan, as well as materials outlining the case for Great Park support. The contract does not call for the contractor to move forward with actually raising the funds.

Some board members, however, worried that the Great Park Corporation will have a difficult time raising money in an economic downturn, and may be duplicating fundraising efforts by the Great Park Conservancy.

Great Park staff estimated that it would take the consultant about a year to complete the contract, at which point the fundraising effort could launch. Staff said that, depending on economic conditions, it would take up to two more years to actually raise the funds.

Councilman Larry Agran, who also serves as the Great Park chairman, said he hoped to bring the “culture of philanthropy” that exists in the Midwest and East Coast to Orange County.

“I want us to have a plan, to see if we can begin to develop that culture of philanthropy,” Agran said. “This is the time to move forward. Good economy, bad economy, let's not lose our focus.”

Board member Walkie Ray questioned whether private and corporate donors would be willing to step up and financially support what is essentially a city project. Officials noted that the donations would go toward the Great Park Corporation, which ultimately answers to the city council.

Councilman Steven Choi, who also serves on the parks Board of Directors, pointed out that the Great Park Conservancy is already charged with fundraising for the Great Park, holding several major fundraisers a year.

"I don't know if this is the right time, or a good investment of almost \$300,000," Choi said. "This is a high-ticket item."

Mayor Beth Krom and Councilman Sukhee Kang, both Great Park board members, contended that the consultant was needed to help lay the groundwork for fundraising as the corporation moves closer to commencing with costly construction projects.

"It is going to take a substantial amount of money to move forward," Kang said. "We have to really think aggressively in this project. We can talk about how the economy is bad and the sky is falling, but that isn't going to move the project forward."

The \$22 million in fundraising is targeted specifically at several features within the recently opened preview park. Great Park staff is still looking for private partners to help fund future studies of several park features, including an amphitheatre, botanical garden, library, multicultural center, National Archives location and a water science park.

Great Park leaders have already hired Townsend Public affairs to go after public funds, setting their sights on \$1.5 million in federal money for the restoration of an aviation hangar, rehabilitation of water storage tanks and the creation of community gardens. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif. announced during a May visit to the park that she would help the city in their quest for federal funds.

The city is also seeking \$2 million for a "transit guideway system" in the Great Park and the nearby Irvine Spectrum, \$3 million for a transportation center near the Great Park, and \$1.5 million for a fiber-optic network to provide public-safety video and communications equipment in public facilities on and around the park.

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