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Great Park preview a crowd pleaser

Return of the iconic orange balloon ride and unveiling of the first portion of a 27.5 acre preview park mark the Festival of Flight.

By SEAN EMERY
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

IRVINE – Great Park master designer Ken Smith stood amongst the hundreds of visitors enjoying the fresh grass and warm weather at the newly opened preview park Saturday, as the air filled with kites and model planes, and the iconic orange balloon ride once again took to the skies.

After two and a half years spent conceiving an award-winning design, Smith and his team watched as many park visitors got their first taste of the Great Park. The 27.5 acre preview park represents only a fraction of the ambitious 1,347-acre Great Park, but officials hope the project will provide a glimpse of things to come.

"Everybody seems happy," Smith said. "There are so many people scattered throughout the park doing different things, and it's great to see people smiling and laughing."

City leaders unveiled the preview park during the "Festival of Flight," which marked the third anniversary of Irvine taking control of the Great Park land.

Saturday's biggest draw was the return of the balloon ride, which was grounded in February after allegations of safety violations. A Federal Aviation Administration investigation recently cleared the balloon to fly again, with officials preparing to begin night flights starting this week.

"People will get an opportunity to get an evening view of Orange County with all the lights twinkling," said Mayor Beth Krom, who also serves on the parks board of directors.

Children in an adjacent grassy area were busy making and flying their own kites, playing Frisbee with family, and watching remote-controlled planes fly through the air.

Reminders of the park's military heritage also dotted the preview park, including permanent features such as a historic timeline drawn on an adjacent runway and a renovated aircraft hangar that officials plan to turn into a café.

Great Park Design Team member Yehudi Gaffen described the preview park as "the seed for which the rest of the park will grow." He said that nothing in the preview park will be torn out, with designers planning to incorporate the features into the larger park design.

"The people working on it feel they are a part of history, so it makes work easier," Gaffen said. "We can all feel the energy."

Local leaders pointed to the preview park as concrete proof of the park's progress, in the face of criticism over the pace of Great Park development. Officials point out that years of work has gone into innovated designs, but critics and some Great Park board members have questioned why the only attraction open to the public until now has been the balloon ride.

"This is a park for the century, so it will take some time," said Councilman Sukhee Kang, who also serves on the Great Park Board of Directors. "The key is we have to look at a long-term plan."

Lennar Corp. used the Festival of Flight to preview their own development – particularly their plans for a "Main Street" to anchor the Lifelong Learning District, a mix of educational, retail and eventually residential uses expected to break ground in October.

"It's a place for people to get together and enjoy each other," said Emile Haddad, Lennar's chief investment officer.

The Festival of Flight kicks off a summer's worth of entertainment at the Great Park, including free weekly dances and performances beginning in August.

"We own this land, we own the Great Park in common, and it is for the benefit of all of Orange County," said Councilman Larry Agran, who also serves as chairman of the parks board of directors.



















Voices

"It's good to see that they are putting a lot of money into the development of the park, although it is a bit of a bummer that there will be so much residential use too."

Tom Meyer, Irvine

"We came down here when (El Toro) first closed and it was scary. This is a great improvement. I'll come back as soon as they have more trees."

Becky Laubie, Brea

"It's nice but it's fledgling. I saw the plans and they are outstanding. There needs to be something for everybody and I think that is what they are planning for."

Ed Mosqueda, Rancho Santa Margarita

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Upcoming Great Park Events

Saturday Night Concerts (beginning at 8 p.m.)

- Aug. 2: **Honk** - a classic Orange County rock band from the '70s.
- Aug. 9: **Jaipur Kawa Brass Band**- a Bollywood wedding band.
- Aug. 16: **Vagabond Opera**- new sounds from Portland, cribbing from Marlene Dietrich, Edith Piaf, cabaret and Klezmer.
- Aug. 23: **Hapa** – Contemporary Hawaiian sounds.
- Sept. 6: **Eileen Ivers & Immigrant Soul**– Celtic fiddle in the new world.
- Sept. 13: **Quetzal** – Chicano folk-rock.
- Sept. 20: **Yaelisa & Caminos Flamencos**– Classic Spanish flamenco music and dance.
- Sept. 27: **Edgar Meyer and Chris Thile**– Bluegrass and classical crossover.

Friday Night Dance Parties (beginning at 8 p.m.)

Aug. 8: **Derek Bordeaux**– R&B covers of Marvin Gaye, Sam Cooke and all the greats.

Aug. 15: **Mike McCaffrey**– Piano trio does Sinatra, Nat King Cole and other smooth and styling hits.

Aug. 22: **Johnny Polanco y Conjunto Armistad**– L.A.'s best-loved salsa band.

Aug. 29: **Big Sandy and his Fly-Rite Boys**– Roots, rockabilly and Western Swing.

Sept. 5: **Eve Selis**– Queen of roadhouse rockers.

Sept. 12: **Los Pinguos**– Contemporary pan-Latin band from Buenos Aires.

Sept. 26: **Pete Jacobs Wartime Radio Revue**– The sounds of WWII, from Benny Goodman to the Andrews Sisters.

Other Great Park events

Oct. 2: **Veteran's Homecoming.**

Oct. 25: **Big Orange Pumpkin.**