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Editorial: Great Park publicity is getting old

Enough already on the PR. The public understands that this property has the potential to be a fabulous park, just as Pyongyang has the potential to be one of the world's great cities.

An Orange County Register editorial

Six years after the city of Irvine annexed the 4,700-acre former El Toro Marine Corps Air Station to turn it into a giant public park to rival Golden Gate Park in San Francisco or Balboa Park in San Diego, residents will find about what one should expect from a government-driven project of this magnitude. Which is to say, large expenditures, nothing much to show for it in terms of actual park construction, but lots of glossy brochures telling Orange County residents what a gee-whiz job city officials and park leaders are doing to create this landmark.

In this context, there's even one real attraction that we couldn't make up: a giant hot-air balloon ride, which is, of course, temporarily grounded.

The Register reported Sunday that "Great Park leaders have spent six years promoting ambitious visions of a majestic, 1,300-acre central park, where military runways, hangars and chain-link fences are transformed into expanses of sports fields, eye-catching natural landmarks and cultural gathering points."

Instead, the park corporation has taken this public asset and spent \$6 million on public-relations programs, out of a \$63 million proposed budget for 2008-09, for community presentations and color brochures. Irvine Councilman Larry Agran, the Great Park board chairman, justifies the one-sided PR campaign as "public information," even as city officials would not provide "a complete list of Forde and Mollrich's [a PR firm on contract for the park] work to date" despite many public information requests.

Enough PR. The public understands that this property has the potential to be a fabulous park, just as Pyongyang has the potential to be one of the world's great cities.

The park brain trust has a new idea, though. In July, it plans to open the first portion of what officials call a "preview park." Instead of opening the planned 1,300-acre park, it is opening a small part of a 27-acre minipark. It will feature a reopened balloon ride and, well, a concert venue. Meanwhile, in Tustin, where a former Marine base was ceded to the city in 2002, officials basically let the private sector build market-based projects, with a resulting 1 million square feet of commercial space, 2,100 homes as well as 10 acres of parks and open space with plans for about 200 acres more.

That may not be nearly as grand as what the pricey Great Park brochures are promising, but we'll take a nice, real, market-based project any day over a majestic, government-heavy one that's unlikely to happen anyway.