

# Great Park starts another CEO search

**The Irvine board overseeing the mammoth development loses 2 top candidates, both with ties to City Hall.**

By William Heisel, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
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The Irvine board that oversees the Great Park project abruptly scrapped plans Thursday to announce the appointment of a new chief executive amid controversy over how previous chief executives had been appointed.

And although the board pledged to conduct a nationwide search to find the best executive to oversee one of the largest public works projects in the country, The Times has learned that the top two finalists for the job both had close ties to Irvine City Hall.

The board's first pick was Kurt Haunfelner, vice president of exhibits and collections at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. Haunfelner also is a longtime friend of City Councilman Larry Agran, chairman of the Great Park board, and is the brother of the late Mark Steven Haunfelner, a former Agran aide.

The board's second pick, whose appointment was expected to be announced Thursday, was Rod Cooper, the Great Park's operations manager. Cooper formerly was the parks director for L.A. County, where he oversaw more than 2,000 employees and more than 100 parks.

Both candidates, however, declined the position.

The rotating door for chief executives -- the project has had four in its first four years -- has prompted criticism of Great Park officials for relying on local and politically connected talent. Critics say the \$1-billion development, which will sprawl over 1,347 acres on a closed Marine base, requires more expertise.

"This is a huge public trust on a large piece of public land being developed with a big pile of public money," said Chris Mears, an attorney and former Great Park board member. "Every person who is hired should be beyond any appearance of impropriety."

The last chief executive, Marty Bryant, resigned in January, citing health reasons. The Times revealed this week that he had pleaded guilty in 1989 to embezzling funds in San Juan Capistrano to buy cocaine. Before running the Great Park, Bryant had

been a longtime Irvine city employee.

At Thursday's board meeting, the agenda item listing the announcement of a new chief executive was pulled without discussion. Lisa Mills, the recruiter hired to find a new chief executive, was present there and ready to answer board members' questions, said Irvine spokesman Louie Gonzalez.

But when board member Christina Shea asked for an overview of the process and an explanation of why the announcement was suddenly dropped, Agran cut her off.

"I'm going to interrupt you," he said. "I don't want you to speak to anything as to first candidates, second candidates, third candidates, fourth candidates."

"We're not running a CIA," Shea said. "This is a public agency and processes can be discussed publicly."

Pressed after the meeting about why he had ended the discussion, Agran became agitated, cursed at a reporter and walked away.

If Cooper had been promoted to the chief executive spot, he would have fit the pattern established when City Manager Allison Hart ran the project from 2004 until 2005.

Since then, the board, which is essentially the Irvine City Council and four outside members, has appointed three chief executives, all from within the city's ranks.

After Cooper's withdrawal, Great Park officials said Thursday that they had no other viable candidate and would regroup next week. The subcommittee assigned to recruit a new chief executive consists of Agran, three board members, the city manager and an assistant city manager.

Cooper declined to comment about the executive search.

Haunfelner said he backed out of the running in October after deciding that he wanted to continue overseeing a major museum renovation.

He started working at the Museum of Science and Industry five years ago after stints at Disney and BRC Imagination Arts.

"It was the single hardest decision that I have ever had to make in my life, because I believe in the vision for the park and I believe in the people who are trying to realize

that vision," Haunfelner said.

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