

Hundreds see Great preview

BY SEAN EMERY STAFF

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. An FAA investigation recently cleared the balloon to fly again, with officials preparing to begin night flights starting next 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.



Visitors arrive at the Preview Park to take part in the Festival of Flight event at the Great Park. The event was the official opening of the expanded 27-acre Preview Park. OCREGISTER.COM