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Irvine mum on felon hired as Great Park CEO

Marty Bryant pleaded guilty in 1989 to embezzling public money.

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THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER
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IRVINE – When city officials needed someone to lead the birth of Orange County's \$1.1 billion Great Park, they chose a man with public works expertise, two decades of experience working for Irvine and – perhaps unknown to them – a felony conviction for embezzling public money.

On Wednesday, Irvine officials reacted – with silence – to news that former Great Park CEO Marty Bryant pleaded guilty nearly two decades ago to misappropriating roughly \$22,000 in building fees while working for the city of San Juan Capistrano. Bryant was named CEO in January.

When he stepped down from the post in June, a city spokeswoman attributed the decision to health issues.

Attempts to reach Bryant, 54, were unsuccessful. When his departure was announced in spring, he issued a prepared statement calling the decision to retire "bittersweet."

"The time is ripe for me to welcome the next chapter of my life with the same energy and enthusiasm that served me in my professional life," Bryant said.

Bryant's tenure with San Juan Capistrano lasted from 1977 to 1985, during which time he was an engineering official who collected building fees. Investigators, asked to look into missing money, ultimately accused Bryant of diverting about \$22,000 in fees for his own use. He pleaded guilty in 1989.

Before being charged, Bryant had left San Juan Capistrano for Irvine's public works department, a division he was in charge of before being hired as the Great Park's third CEO.

When announcing Bryant's selection to lead creation of the 1,347-acre Great Park, officials spotlighted his successful effort to obtain tens of millions of dollars to build Jeffrey Road under railroad tracks as well as his work securing a deal to extend a landfill, which also scored Irvine millions of dollars.

"Marty Bryant, in my view, is very capable to step in and make sure we don't lose any momentum with the Great Park," said Great Park Chairman Larry Agran, who didn't return a call for comment Wednesday.

City spokesman Louie Gonzalez, to whom top Irvine officials directed calls, said the city would have no comment.

The Los Angeles Times, which reported Wednesday on Bryant's record, said Irvine officials didn't run a criminal-background check on him because he had a clean working record with the city dating to 1985.

Kevin Tiernan, a partner at the Newport Beach-based employment search firm Robert Tiernan Associates, said Wednesday that such a decision would be ill-advised.

While private companies can do as they wish, public agencies have a special duty, Tiernan said. "When it comes to a city and the fiscal responsibility (to) the taxpayers, I would hope they'd do a background check."

In the event officials already knew of Bryant's record, they might have erred in hiring him, even though so much time had passed, Tiernan added. "A felony shouldn't be overlooked," he said.

An interim CEO has been overseeing the Great Park since Bryant's departure, but a permanent successor could be named as early as today.

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Marty Bryant

