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Irvine appoints fifth Great Park CEO in four years

Two board members say internal promotion was in effect made in secret.

Sean Emery
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

IRVINE – The Great Park Board of Directors on Thursday appointed a new chief executive officer, ending a contentious year-long search but angering some park leaders who say the decision to promote Deputy CEO Mike Ellzey was made behind closed doors.

Ellzey, a former executive director of the Golden Gate Concourse Authority in San Francisco, will officially take the reigns of the Great Park Corporation on Aug. 9. He replaces interim CEO Sharon Landers, who will return to City Hall as an assistant city manager.

A search committee led by City Councilman Larry Agran late last week backed moving Ellzey to the top park spot, crediting him with overseeing the creation of the recently unveiled preview park. Council members Christina Shea and Steven Choi – who serve on the Great Park board but not on the search committee – voted against the promotion, concerned that the decision was made during what Choi referred to as a "secret behind the scenes meeting."

Ellzey is the Great Park's fifth CEO in four years, board members said. The last permanent CEO, Marty Bryant, left in January 2007. It was later revealed that Bryant had pleaded guilty in 1989 to embezzling public funds in San Juan Capistrano in order to buy cocaine.

Great Park leaders pledged to conduct a nationwide CEO search, reportedly receiving more than 150 applications. But Shea and Choi cried foul when Kurt Haunfelner, the brother of a former Agran aide, emerged as the original CEO finalist.

Shea and Choi in January filed suit against the Great Park board, demanding access to the resumes and documents tied to the search, a move that others on the board criticized as politically motivated. The suit was settled in March, with Shea and Choi allowed access to the resumes during a closed session.

Both Haunfelner and the board's second handpicked finalist, Great Park Operations Manager Rod Cooper, turned the position down. The board in April decided to suspend the CEO search until January 2009.

Ellzey was considered one of the top CEO candidates, several officials said. The board decided to hire him six months ago, creating the Deputy CEO position.

Officials say Ellzey was instrumental in guiding the creation of a 27.5-acre preview park, the first portion of which opened last month. The preview parks success, along with Landers' desire to return to her City Hall duties after more than a year guiding Great Park development, spurred City Manager Sean Joyce to suggest Ellzey's promotion.

"You can search for gold all over the world, but why do that when you have gold nuggets right under your feet?" Agran asked. "With Mike we have a gold nugget right here, and we don't have to go back to this laborious process that we have already pursued."

Shea and Choi both said they respected Ellzey, but argued that the decision to re-convene the search committee without the full board's approval was a violation of park policy.

"This is what creates the lack of trust, the negative comments, and makes it seem like there is this continual secrecy going on," Shea said. "It has really just been a mess this last year."

Board member Bill Kogerman defended the search committee's actions, saying they took place under the direction of the city manager and board attorney.

"I am tired of certain innuendo that is constantly out there," Kogerman said. "It may be OK in politics, but it is not ok with me."

Contact the writer: 949-553-2911 or semery@ocregister.com



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