

Irvine names a Great Park administrator

Michael Ellzey is appointed during a closed-door committee meeting months after the official search was halted. He will need confirmation by the park's governing board.

By Tony Barboza, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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Irvine officials have tapped Michael Ellzey, a recently hired deputy executive, to be promoted to top administrator of the Orange County Great Park.

Ellzey was promoted Thursday during a closed-door meeting of an executive search committee. The decision has yet to be approved by the park's governing board.

If approved, Ellzey would take the helm of one of the nation's largest and most ambitious public works projects, converting 1,347 acres of the old El Toro Marine Corps base into a public park at a cost of more than \$1.1 billion in public funds.

The decision was unexpected because board members voted in April to suspend the search until January 2009, citing the uncertainty of park financing and the pace of construction and a desire to keep the appointment from becoming a political issue during an election year. City elections are in November.

Councilwoman Christina Shea, who is not on the search committee, called the promotion a "backroom deal" that violated the board's decision to put off the search.

But City Manager Sean Joyce said it did not contradict that policy because "there have been no search activities."

The process for choosing executives has divided the City Council, which oversees the park project, prompting debate and a lawsuit over council members' access to resumes.

Ellzey was one of five finalists in a national search that abruptly stopped in November after two men with ties to Irvine City Hall rose to the top of the field of 150 candidates, then declined the position.

The Times revealed last November that the city had promoted former chief executive Marty Bryant without a background check. Bryant had pleaded guilty to embezzling public funds in 1989 to buy cocaine. He had resigned from the city, citing health problems, in January 2007.

Ellzey, hired as deputy chief executive for the Great Park in February, has shepherded the construction of a 27-acre "preview park" around the balloon ride at the former Marine base.

"With the success of that behind us, Mike has demonstrated his abilities to step into this position," said Sharon Landers, assistant city manager and the park's interim chief executive.

A former Tulare County administrator, Ellzey also spent six years as executive director of the Golden Gate Park Concourse Authority in San Francisco, where he supervised the construction of an 800-stall underground parking garage.

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