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Irvine puts resident privacy measure, Great Park poll on November ballot

Some leaders express concern that City Council candidates could exploit the ballot issues for the current political race.

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IRVINE – Voters in November will weigh in on the direction of the Great Park and tighter restrictions on City Hall's release of residents' personal information

The council on Tuesday evening unanimously agreed to place the two high-profile issues before the voters, hoping to end the months of debate between the city's two political factions. But some council members expressed worry that the measures could be used to fuel an already heated election season.

Great Park

City leaders said the Great Park measure is designed to gauge residents' satisfaction with the transition from the former El Toro Marine Base to the ambitious 1,346-acre central park.

While park leaders have touted recent successes such as the opening of a 27.5-acre preview park and the impending 70 percent completion of schematic designs, project critics, including some current and former park board members, have questioned the pace of development, wondering why more attractions have yet to materialize.

"It has been a bumpy road at times," said Councilman Larry Agran, who also serves as Chairman of the Great Park Board of Directors. "We have had our doubters, defeatists and professional pessimists. Now it is time to return to the ballot, to see if the course we have charted is ratified by the voters."

Mayor Beth Krom said the measure is timed to coincide with the Great Park Corporation's transition from planning to development.

"If the message that comes back to us is that (the voters) don't like the direction (we) are going, I would sure like to know that now," Krom said.

Most notably, voters will be asked to weigh in on the council's 2006 decision to keep the Great Park directly under Irvine control. A divided council agreed to keep the Great Park Corp. – led by the community's five elected leaders and four at-large appointments – as essentially a department of the city.

An Orange County Grand Jury report urged the city to create an independent Great Park leadership board, arguing that keeping the project under city control turned what was conceived as a county park into an Irvine project. The council majority rejected the Grand Jury findings, which Agran earlier this month described as a thinly veiled attempt to turn the project over to the Board of Supervisors.

Councilwoman Christina Shea worried that the council majority would use the measure to attack her and Councilman Steven Choi, who voted against the decision to keep the Great Park directly under Irvine control.

"Why have people vote on a work in progress?" Shea said. "It just looks political to me, like we are putting it there because it is election season."

Personal privacy

The second measure would tighten the city's control over personal information sent to City Hall, allowing officials to decide on a case-by-case basis whether to disclose information given to the city for a "limited specific purpose" and which the city has promised to keep confidential.

City leaders requested the measure in response to the recent release of thousands of e-mail addresses, leading some to worry that the information could fall into the wrong hands.

While the e-mail data provided the impetus behind the debate, the proposed measure refers only to "individuals' public information." Officials are hoping to draw the line between information sent for a limited purpose – such as signing up for community classes or children's programs – where confidentiality has been promised, rather than e-mails contacting city leaders or employees regarding community issues.

"If somebody is signing up for a class, they believe that the information that they are giving is for the limited purpose of enrolling in that class," Agran said. "With this we can honor that reasonable privacy expectation."

A report prepared by the city attorney earlier this month determined that e-mail addresses may be withheld if the public interest in disclosing them is outweighed by the public interest in keeping them private.

But, some worry that the new restrictions would not withstand a legal challenge, since the California Public Records Act determines what information kept by the city is publicly available. Agran said the city would be willing to fight if the measure is challenged in court.

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