

Irvine's Great Park CEO had history of embezzling, cocaine use

By William Heisel, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

November 7, 2007

When the executive who was asked to head one of the largest and costliest public works projects in the nation abruptly departed earlier this year, Irvine city officials cited health reasons.

What they did not say was that Marty Bryant -- a longtime city employee appointed this year to shepherd the billion-dollar Great Park -- had a troubled past: He pleaded guilty in 1989 to embezzling public funds in San Juan Capistrano to feed a cocaine habit.

Irvine officials said Tuesday that they did not run a criminal background check on Bryant before he assumed the chief executive's post with the Orange County Great Park Corp., a city subsidiary, because he had been a city employee in good standing since 1985.

A former Irvine city manager, Paul Brady, said he became aware of the conviction in 1989, after Bryant was hired as a transportation analyst. Brady said he decided against firing Bryant, insisting instead that he never be promoted. After Brady retired in 1999, however, Bryant was promoted anyway, eventually becoming public works director.

Larry Agran, the chairman of the Great Park board and Irvine mayor at the time Bryant was convicted, said he did not know about the conviction until a Times reporter called him Tuesday. It is not clear whether anyone else on the board knew of the conviction before Bryant was promoted to the chief executive post in January or whether the conviction had anything to do with his abrupt departure six months later.

Bryant, 54, has since moved to Hawaii. When contacted by telephone, he hung up on a reporter after being asked about his background and did not return repeated follow-up calls.

He was the third chief executive officer to lead the project -- a 1,347-acre public park to be surrounded by new homes and businesses -- in less than four years. The park board, made up of the mayor, four City Council members and four at-large members, is expected to announce his replacement as early as Thursday.

Bryant's hiring and sudden departure, and the lack of steady leadership in general, have caused some to question the city's grip on the project. Originally scheduled to open in 2009, the park is still in the design phase with little more than a balloon ride to show for tens of millions of dollars in public spending.

"They have this pattern of putting people in who are not qualified and then having to deal with the carnage after the fact," said Gary Matus, a managing partner for Egon Zehnder International, the country's largest privately held executive search agency, who is not affiliated with the city or Great Park.

Bryant's conviction stems from a 1989 guilty plea to felony misappropriation of funds. He stole at least \$22,880 in developer's fees from the city of San Juan Capistrano while working there as an engineering technician, according to court files. The same type of fees are funding the Great Park.

"Why would you put someone who had been convicted of stealing public funds in charge of a corporation that's going to be spending public funds?" said Stephen Julian, the San Juan Capistrano city manager at the time of the embezzlement.

According to court records, Bryant took checks written to the city by developers for project reviews, then used his position as an officer with the city employees' union to deposit them into the union bank account. He then wrote himself checks from the union account.

Orange County sheriff's investigators said at the time in a probation officer's report that the city had "terrible accounting records" and that it was possible that the defendant had taken "hundreds of thousands of dollars" without a trace between 1982 and 1985.

Bryant told a probation officer in 1989 that he was a "weekend binger," who had snorted cocaine as much as two dozen times every weekend. He said, however, that he had recently quit, according to the probation records.

By the time he was arrested in 1988, after a San Juan Capistrano city employee noticed some missing funds, he had landed a new job in Irvine's public works department.

Julian, the San Juan Capistrano city manager at the time, said he called Irvine's city manager, Brady, to warn him about Bryant. If it were up to him, Julian said, he would have fired him from the analysts' job. He said he was astonished to hear that Bryant had moved up the ranks over the years, to public works director and then the Great Park chief executive officer.

Brady, too, said he was surprised to hear that Bryant had ascended to chief executive.

"We've always had quality employees with good records and I would not want to have somebody who had been accused of something moving into a position of authority," Brady said.

"The magnitude of that project is probably the biggest single project that Orange County is going to see in the future," he said. "I think they'd want somebody with a very clean, outstanding track record."

Brady said he discussed Bryant's criminal record with then-assistant city manager Allison Hart, who took over for Brady when he retired and later served as the Great Park's first chief executive officer. She told the Times on Tuesday that she knew about Bryant's past but could not say when she found out. He was promoted to deputy director and then director of public works while she was city manager.

When the city last promoted him in January, to Great Park chief, its press release touted him as having "the skills and management experience now required by the Park project as the development of critical infrastructure begins."

Even if he had known about the conviction, Agran said, Bryant's criminal history would have been overshadowed by his successes planning and expanding the city's transportation system.

"He was at the center of our entire public works program," Agran said. "I think it's probably self-evident that there is no better traffic signal and public roads system in all of Orange County."

Agran said that it was not Great Park's job to investigate the chief executive's background and told The Times to call City Manager Sean Joyce and ask why Bryant was not screened. Joyce said that he thought Bryant's 22 years of city experience spoke for itself.

Bryant was replaced on an interim basis by another assistant city manager, Sharon Landers.

"They're not hiring people with top-flight experience," said Dick Sim, a former Irvine Co. executive who resigned from the Great Park board in 2005. "They need to be going outside the city and hiring someone who has actually worked on a major park project."

Matus said that background checks are standard for executive searches, even with internal promotions.

"I think it's sloppy talent management not to have an understanding of who's working in your organization," Matus said. "And with a city, the public are your shareholders, so it's even more important to know about someone's past."

william.heisel@latimes.com