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*From the Los Angeles Times*

## Irvine Set to Take Control of Great Park

At the inception of the park, city officials had said that an independent entity would build it. Critics say one city shouldn't hold the reins.

By Jean O. Pasco  
Times Staff Writer

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The city of Irvine is preparing to retreat from a pledge to transfer control of the Orange County Great Park to an independent countywide panel that has been overseeing its development for three years.

The Irvine City Council, whose members have squabbled for years over the vision of the park and who should control it, tonight is expected to vote to relegate the Orange County Great Park Corp. to an advisory role.

The change would mean the city alone would control about \$380 million in developer fees earmarked to build the park.

That would not be the way the park idea was sold after Orange County voters killed plans in 2002 for an international airport on the site of the former El Toro Marine base.

City officials said creating a separate entity to build the park would protect Irvine taxpayers if costs soared beyond what was envisioned.

Since then, the Great Park corporation, comprising the five Irvine council members and four directors from outside the city, has spent about \$30 million to hire a master park designer, an administrative staff and public relations consultants.

Mayor Beth Krom, who is pushing the proposed city takeover, said the corporation would function as a city department. Recent contracts, including hiring New York City landscape architect Ken Smith to design the park, would be sent to the council for ratification.

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"Anything that happens there is going to have an impact on our city," she said of the park.

"The city has ultimate responsibility for this resource. It's not just some power trip we're on."

Critics of the park plan have argued against allowing such a large public resource — one of the biggest tracts of open land in Orange County — to be controlled by a single city.

The park will cover about 1,300 acres.

An additional 2,400 acres of the former Marine base will be developed into homes and businesses, and 1,000 acres will be preserved for wildlife habitat.

"This is the difference between great expectations and reality setting in," said Robert Stern with the Center for Governmental Studies in Los Angeles.

"The obvious difference is that now the park board becomes window dressing."

The council was set to vote last July on a lengthy operating agreement that spelled out the city's promise to lease the park land to the corporation for 99 years and to allow it to spend the millions in development and other money generated from the park.

But no vote was taken. A second draft circulated in October also wasn't acted upon.

Irvine Councilwoman Christina Shea, a frequent critic of how park funds have been spent, began pressing in January for a clear definition of how the city and corporation should function.

Making the board's role advisory "guts the entire purpose and authority for what it was created to do," Shea said. "We're totally going back on what we promised. This is really unethical."

Irvine Councilman Larry Agran, who is the park board's chairman, is expected to support the change.

He couldn't be reached for comment Monday.

The prospect of the park board losing its authority caught some surrounding government officials by surprise.

"I hadn't heard about this," said Laguna Hills Councilman L. Allan Songstad Jr., who still chairs a coalition of 10 South County cities that fought the airport and

urged support for the Great Park.

"Surrounding cities still have an interest in how this public acreage is developed," he said. "I would hope that whatever structure they end up with and whatever advisory groups they have fulfill their promise of having significant input from around Orange County."

Orange County Supervisor Bill Campbell, a finalist last month for a vacant park board seat, said he wasn't aware that the city intended to keep the land and the developer fees.

"That's a real change," he said.

Former park board member Richard Sim said he resigned last year in part because he felt the board should have greater representation from outside Irvine.

"If they do this, what they've done is lied to the people of Orange County," Sim said.

"It has just been promise one thing, do another, and that's why I left. They should change the name to the Irvine Great Park."

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