

Orange County Great Park board postpones search for CEO

Officials said they didn't want to switch leadership with uncertainty surrounding the project's financing and pace of construction. The quest is to continue in January.

By Tony Barboza, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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In another hang-up in the quest to build a massive park in Orange County, Irvine's Great Park board voted Thursday to suspend its contentious search for a chief executive until January.

Two council members last year questioned the fairness of the city's national search for an executive to oversee the conversion of the former El Toro Marine base, after two men with ties to City Hall rose to the top of 150 candidates, then declined the position.

Thursday's 4-2 vote followed acrimonious debate and allegations of impropriety among board members, which have become common in their discussions about the search. The park's last chief executive, Marty Bryant, resigned in January 2007. A search for his replacement began in July.

The Times in November reported that Bryant had pleaded guilty in 1989 to embezzling public funds in San Juan Capistrano to buy cocaine.

Officials said Thursday that they postponed the search because they didn't want to change leadership at a time when the depressed housing market has cast uncertainty on the park's financing and pace of construction.

Councilman Larry Agran, the park board's chairman, whose longtime friend Kurt Haunfelner was the top choice in last year's search, said he favored the postponement so that the search wouldn't become an issue in the November election. All five members of the City Council are running for mayor or council.

"I don't want [the search] in a political year to become a political football for people to play with," Agran said.

Opposing the delay were board members Christina Shea and Steven Choi, Irvine council members who sued the Orange County Great Park Corp., a nonprofit agency of the city, after they were not allowed to view job candidates' resumes. They gained access to the documents in a settlement with the park last month.

"There are some very stellar candidates that we should be looking at," Shea said.

Assistant City Manager Sharon Landers, who is serving as interim chief executive, and Michael Ellzey, a former executive director of the Golden Gate Park Concourse Authority in San Francisco who was hired in February as deputy chief executive, will run the park for at least the next nine months.

They will oversee construction of a 27-acre "preview park" around the park's balloon ride, the planning of summer events and a team of dozens of consultants who are designing and engineering the massive public works project.

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