

# O.C. balloon ride safety investigated



Ken Hively / Los Angeles Times

The Orange County Great Park balloon is not allowed to fly higher than 499 feet, and cannot be flown within 1,000 feet of clouds — regulations that have been violated, according to a former pilot.

**Irvine and FAA officials will look into complaints by a former pilot that regulations were disregarded at the Great Park ride.**

By Tony Barboza, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
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Irvine is investigating allegations by a former pilot that the Orange County Great Park balloon ride has flouted safety regulations by flying in clouds, low visibility and high wind conditions and deliberately soaring higher than its permit allows.

In a letter last week to the Federal Aviation Administration, Jonathan Bradford alleged that a "cavalier disregard" for FAA rules at the tethered balloon ride contributed to a "culture of unsafe behavior."

The letter has prompted concerns by some city officials that, if the claims are true, the park has potentially put some of its 40,000 passengers at risk.

The helium balloon, which is tied by a cable to a concrete platform, is not allowed to fly higher than 499 feet, and cannot be flown within 1,000 feet of clouds or if visibility is less than five miles, according to an FAA waiver issued to the park before the ride opened in July.

Bradford said chief pilot Gary Stevens usually did not suspend flights until visibility was as little as two miles.

He said Stevens also took the balloon to a height of more than 600 feet at least twice by using a backup generator to override the balloon's normal stopping point, one time "because there were VIPs on board," including Irvine City Council members and high-level park officials.

Bradford also said Stevens routinely ignored rules against flying in low clouds.

Stevens, reached late Friday, described Bradford as an inexperienced trainee whose claims were "ridiculous and unprovable."

Irvine will hire an independent investigator to look into the claims, said city spokesman Louie Gonzalez.

The FAA has received the complaint and will investigate, said spokesman Ian Gregor.

Great Park operations manager Rod Cooper said he was not aware of the balloon ever being flown outside the requirements of its waiver.

Cooper added that Bradford was terminated last month after only six months on the job and described him as a disgruntled ex-employee.

"We've flown over 40,000 people safely. It's a very safe attraction, and we haven't had any real problems with it," Cooper said. "I'm not saying that it never went over 500 feet, but I was not out there, so I can't say for sure that we never went up higher."

He said Bradford expressed concerns about proper inflation and a rope leading to the control valve, but did not tell him until after his contract was terminated.

Bradford said he told Cooper, Stevens and the balloon's manufacturer about the violations, verbally and in writing, while he still worked for them.

Councilwoman Christina Shea called for the balloon to be grounded until it is determined whether the allegations are true.

"If there is any thought that there are issues of mismanagement, we should not be flying that balloon," she said.

The balloon ride is operated by Aerophile, a firm based in Paris.

Stevens, owner of a company called BalloonVision, works under contract for Aerophile. Until last year, he ran a similar balloon ride on the Portuguese island of Madeira.

Bradford, of Ottawa, Canada, worked for Aerophile for six months before his contract was terminated because of problems with his visa, according to park officials.

The public has at least once expressed concerns that the balloon may have been flying in unsafe conditions.

In August or September, police were sent to the ride after a resident called about the balloon operating during a thunderstorm watch, said Irvine Police Department spokesman Rick Handfield.

Stevens, the chief pilot, told police he was aware of the storm and that "they were fine," Handfield said, though the date of the incident was unclear, and it was unknown whether the balloon had been in the air at the time.

On Dec. 21, the balloon was grounded for three weeks for repairs after a windstorm damaged the wheels and the gondola. The balloon had been tied down but had not been secured in a "low mooring" position for high wind conditions.

Park officials said the high winds were unexpected, but in an interview Bradford said he repeatedly warned Stevens of the wind forecasts.

Though no passengers were on board during that storm, the incident prompted an admonition from engineer Matthieu Gobbi at Aerophile.

"When there is any doubt about the wind, thunders, visibility, condition of the equipment, permissions . . . you should not fly," Gobbi wrote in a Dec. 24 e-mail to Great Park pilots.

The balloon ride, which cost \$5 million to build, is the first and only attraction at the old El Toro Marine base, which is being converted into a 1,347-acre public park.

Plans call for the balloon area to be surrounded with five acres of grass, shade trees, benches and tables in the next year and a half -- at a cost of \$14 million.

As part of that expansion, Great Park officials are seeking a new waiver from the FAA to allow night flights and flights up to 1,000 feet, said Sharon Landers, the park's interim chief executive.

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