

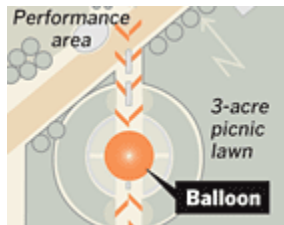
Orange County's Great Park board hires fundraising consultant

It will pay \$285,560 to a firm to study how to line up \$22 million for a small 'preview park.' The consultant is expected to write five reports, but not required to raise any cash.

By Tony Barboza
October 25, 2008

The Orange County Great Park board voted this week to pay \$285,560 to a fundraising consulting firm to help determine how to raise millions to help pay for improvements at the public park, which remains largely undeveloped.

The money will pay Washington, D.C.-based Chora LLC to study how the park board might raise \$22 million to pay for a pod-shaped shelter, palm tree court and performance area in a small "preview park," as well as more studies.



Money search for starter park

The firm is expected to write five reports and prepare materials to help attract funds and donations, but is not required to raise any money during the year's worth of work.

Despite inciting some disagreement over whether it was a judicious use of funds, the contract was approved and is seen as a first step in what Irvine officials hope will yield millions in donations to support the transformation of the former El Toro Marine base into a 1,347-acre city park. The project is billed as the 21st century's first major metropolitan park, drawing comparisons to New York's Central Park and San Diego's Balboa Park.

But the move also highlights the challenges in proceeding with a \$1.6-billion project in a down economy, with critics raising doubts about how successful Irvine will be in attracting donors at a time when the faltering economy has them lukewarm about giving to charitable nonprofits, much less a municipality.

Donors would be giving to the Orange County Great Park Corp., a nonprofit agency of the city of Irvine advised by the City Council and four directors it appoints.

Councilman Steven Choi was the lone vote against funding the consultant, saying it was way too much to spend for "only strategy-building and consulting." He offered to do the same work himself for free.

Choi also questioned whether setting up a city-funded fundraising apparatus would compete with the Great Park Conservancy, a nonprofit founded in 2000 to supplement city money already earmarked for the park.

Irvine Mayor Beth Krom supported the measure, saying the slowed pace of development of the park had given the city "the gift of time" that should be taken advantage of to develop the tools to raise funds. Park officials said it has always been their intent to supplement city funds with outside grants and donations.

The city has spent more than \$72 million designing the park and building some modest features, such as a portion of a 27-acre "preview park" and a balloon ride. Those funds came from \$200 million in developer's fees paid by home builder Lennar Corp., which plans to build thousands of homes around the park. Taxes from the homes and businesses are expected to fund construction of the park.

But again, because of the economy, the housing project has stalled.

The ambitious design for the park features expansive grassy lawns, trees, trails and a 60-foot-deep man-made canyon leading to a lake. It also includes sports fields and a cultural terrace, which would be home to a botanic garden, amphitheater, museums and cultural centers.

With a fundraising consultant on board, Irvine hopes to appeal to corporations and individual donors with the long-term aim of eventually raising \$200 million.

Chora LLC did not respond to requests for comment, but other firms said private funding for public projects has proved successful, but that the timing is not ideal.

"It might be a pretty tough time to start a project," said Gary Phillips, chairman of the Los Angeles fundraising firm Phillips & Associates, which has seen a 20% to 30% dip in donations because of the poor economy.

James "Walkie" Ray, a developer and member of the Great Park board, voted to hire the consultant, "but not with a huge amount of enthusiasm," he said, after questioning "why any private individual, corporation or foundation would give to a city."

Paul Carey, president of the Orange County chapter of the National Assn. of Fundraising Professionals and a vice president of Cal State Fullerton, said donors are always hesitant about giving directly to a government agency.

"There's the thought that their tax dollars are already supporting that public agency, why do they need private gifts?" he said.

With the Great Park in particular, where the development is expected to proceed in spurts over the next 10 to 20 years, donors also could be dissuaded because the park has not yet established a track record, something Carey says is a common frustration for emerging nonprofits.

"One deterrent is the fact that folks haven't seen anything happening yet, so they would be giving to a vision that's not yet formed or not yet a reality," he said.

"You're selling a vision of helping the homeless or planting trees, but corporations and foundations may be hesitant to support you until they see the product."

Public-private cooperation in building parks is not without precedent.

Donations from corporations and philanthropists accounted for nearly half of the \$470-million price tag for Chicago's Millennium Park, completed in 2004.

Ed Uhlir, executive director of Millennium Park Inc., the nonprofit arm of the city-managed park, said the influx of private donations had an "enormous" impact, allowing the city to turn a "ho-hum park into the poster boy of urban parks."

The private sector, however, is only one new source of park money that Irvine is eyeing.

Since January, the city has paid Townsend Public Affairs Inc. \$7,500 a month to go after local and state grants and lobby U.S. Sens. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) and Diane Feinstein (D-Calif.) for earmarks to benefit the park. The city also is paying the Ferguson Group \$50,000 a year for federal lobbying.

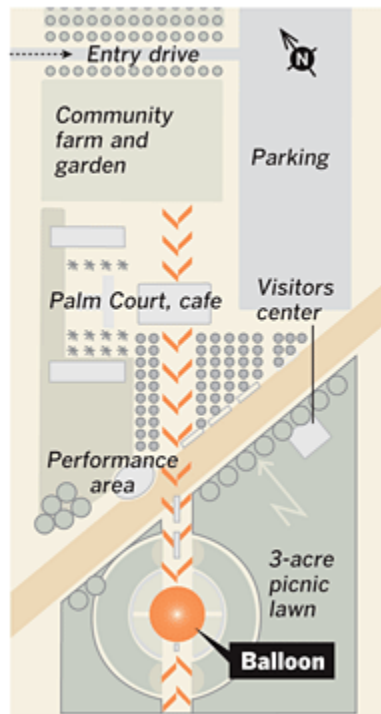
Neither firm has secured any funds yet.

Barboza is a Times staff writer.

tony.barboza@latimes.com

Money search for starter park

The Orange County Great Park board approved paying a consultant \$285,560 to figure out how to raise \$22 million to add additional features to the 27-acre "preview park" within the planned Great Park.



Money search for starter park

October 25, 2008

Source: Orange County Great Park Graphics reporting by **TONY BARBOZA**

Los Angeles Times