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Orange balloon is safe to ride, expert says

Irvine officials hope the balloon will soon be carrying passengers above the Great Park again.

By ERIKA CHAVEZ
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

IRVINE - An independent expert has deemed the Great Park Balloon safe in the wake of safety allegations by a former employee, and city officials hope the orange orb will soon be aloft again.

The balloon has been grounded since late February so that the Federal Aviation Administration and the independent expert could investigate its safety. Last week, the FAA announced that they could not substantiate any of the allegations made by Jonathan Bradford, a former balloon pilot employed by contractor Aerophile.

"The newest findings validated our belief that we are operating a safe attraction," said Marsha Burgess, Great Park spokeswoman. "We look forward to flying it again soon," she said, adding that the group hopes to be granted a new permit in about one week. The FAA pulled the balloon's flight permit on March 17th due to paperwork inaccuracies.

The independent expert's report, by Richard Asper of the Aviation Professionals Group in Florida, said there was no proof of the alleged misdeeds, including flying higher than 500 feet, flying with less than the FAA-required five miles of visibility, and operating the balloon with less than the recommended 1,000 feet between the top of the orb and the lowest clouds.

Asper has examined eight moored balloons similar to the Great Park's, and the report stated "this is one of the safest balloon operations we have observed."

The report did recommend additional safety precautions for future balloon operations, including more comprehensive pilot training, better record-keeping and a database to log all balloon activity and maintenance.

The Orange County Great Park Corporation hired Aviation Professionals Group to conduct the investigation of the tethered helium attraction at the former El Toro Marine base. The cost of the independent investigation was \$30,000.

The balloon has provided a birds-eye view of the future Great Park to more than 40,000 visitors since it launched last July. It is the first public feature of the planned 1,347-acre park.

Bradford, who made the initial safety allegations, could not be reached for comment Tuesday evening.

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An expert hired by the city of Irvine to inspect the Great Park balloon said the balloon is safe for the public to ride. Earlier allegations of unsafe conduct were also inspected by the Federal Aviation Administration.

JEBB HARRIS, THE REGISTER

