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# PR spending dominates Great Park conservancy's budget

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After seven years of brainstorming, banquets, community forums and informational newsletters, the nonprofit conservancy helping transform the tired El Toro Marine base into a thriving Great Park has put aside just \$570,000 – for a botanical garden.

The garden will likely cost at least 100 times as much, according to the nonprofit's chairman.

The traditional mission of private conservatories is to raise big bucks for the care and feeding of landmark parks. But the Foundation for the Great Park's main mission is publicity and public education.

Formed in 2000 to oppose a commercial airport at El Toro, and now known as the Great Park Conservancy, it distributes newsletters and e-mail blasts, maintains a Web site, hosts increasingly expensive fundraisers and touts the park to at least two civic groups each week.

"When there's not a park to conserve yet, what does a conservancy do?" asked executive director Carol Simon. "Let people know there's going to be a wonderful park, while at the same time growing support for it. Public education has been a large part of our work in the early years."

The Conservancy is a small piece of the \$1.1 billion Great Park puzzle, which some feel isn't fitting together quickly enough. In 2002, voters nixed a commercial airport on the base in favor of a majestic, Central Park-style "democratic space." In 2003, **Irvine officials said that children would be playing in the county's largest sports park within three years of El Toro's sale.**

It's clear now that was a fantasy. The three-year anniversary of the sale is July 12. Most of the Great Park is still surrounded by chain link fences. Giant military runways still stripe the ground. There is no sports park.

The one attraction that has launched – a big orange balloon ride – was grounded after allegations of unsafe flying practices. Officials hope it will return to the sky in July, when five acres of a 27-acre "preview park" are slated to open.

The Great Park Conservancy is not in charge of planning the park, or of running it. Those powers belong to a different, nonprofit subsidiary of the city of Irvine, called the Great Park Corporation. The Corporation formed years after the Conservancy was born, but the Conservancy works mostly in its shadow.

The conservancy has raised \$2.8 million since its founding in 2000, and spent \$2.2 million, mostly on publicity and public education. The amount spent on its main mission has fallen below the bar set by the Better Business Bureau for the past two years, while fund-raising spending climbed sharply, tax returns show.

### **MAIN MISSION**

This dive in core-mission spending, Simon said, is because the Conservancy's new "Jewel of Orange County" fundraisers – where attendees dined alfresco, bid on fine jewelry and watched acrobats – were classified solely as fundraisers rather than as program services on its tax returns.

"The Jewel event has become a way for us to focus and educate the public about the park. That's a big part of our strategy," Simon said. "It helps bring on board communities like Newport Beach, that didn't initially support the park. If you consider that public education, then our program services number jumps to over 80 percent."

But the corporation has its own public relations budget, as do the park's designers. Some officials think all this PR is funding misdirected.

"We have spent millions and millions of dollars promoting something that, in my mind, we could have started building," said Irvine Councilwoman Christina Shea. "I don't see the need for a big PR push. We need to roll up our sleeves and build the park."

Shea feels that a much larger portion of the Conservancy's funds should go to long-term savings for the planned botanical garden, which will cost some \$50 million to \$100 million.

But the need is obvious to the Conservancy's Simon. "We find all the time people close and far who still don't know about the Great Park," she said. "If there is redundancy, it may not be enough."

And while the Conservancy has yet to tackle the traditional conservancy task – launching a major capital campaign to raise big money for the park – "we would like to grow in that direction," Simon said.

## **MISSING PIECES**

Six years is not a long time when the park is expected to take 50 years to complete, experts said. But Great Park officials have probably erred by failing to deliver something more useful more quickly.

"The Greensward plan for Central Park was approved on April 28, 1858, and by that next winter, people were ice skating on the lake," said Doug Blonsky of New York's Central Park Conservancy. "Even back then, they knew the importance of showing that you can get something done."

When Central Park's Conservancy took on the park's rehabilitation in 1980, it spent years perfecting a master plan, much as Great Park officials are doing now. "But in those first four years, we didn't just do the master plan – we restored some very high-profile features very quickly, like the Sheep Meadow, the Dairy, Belvedere Castle," said Blonsky, a Great Park advisor. "We went after very, very high profile locations to show folks we're not just going to be waiting around doing a lot of designs."

"I don't think the Great Park is necessarily behind right now, but you do want to get something in the ground growing as soon as you can."

Urban park expert Peter Harnick agrees. "If you have \$200 million, the goal would be to spend it as quickly as possible creating something really terrific so people can come in and say, 'Wow! This is really going to be great!'" said Harnick, director of the Center for City Park Excellence at the Trust for Public Land in Washington, D.C. " Get it open to the public."

The Great Park has a unique set of challenges, the men said.

In New York, visitors to Central Park live and work around the park. "We have our audience – I don't have to go find them," said Blonsky. "It's going to be a little more difficult for you. You don't quite have the audience around the Great Park. You're still going to have to rely on autos and people getting there. It's more of a reach."

Harnick said the Great Park can strain the imagination.

"The bottom line for a conservancy is to come up with a plan, and raise money to carry out the plan," Harnick said. "In this case, to be honest, it's hard for the average person to get it. You tell them, 'That old rundown military airport you pass on the freeway? Wouldn't you like to give us \$10,000 toward making that into a park?'"

"It takes a special person to get that. A visionary. The average person says, 'Show it to me. If I like it, I'll give you money.' It's a daunting challenge."

## **COMING ATTRACTIONS**

Patience, park proponents say, will pay off in the end.

"Everyone always wants to go faster," said developer Michael Ray, Conservancy chairman. "The slowdown in the housing market means that the tax increment financing required to build the park has slowed down. It gives the design team more time to make perfect drawings. I think it's best during design to go slow, be sure of yourself, of how everything connects together. It's good that people can be a little more contemplative."

A small piece of the 1,300-acre park is taking shape. A 27-acre "preview park" is slated to rise around the big orange balloon over the next two years, with the first events kicking off in July. The Conservancy hopes to start work on a "preview garden" for the larger botanical garden over the next year.

Conservancy officials recently went to Washington, D.C. to meet with National Archives officials about the possibility of building a learning center on the park's "Cultural Terrace." The National Archives would provide funding for the building – \$50 million to \$80 million – and a private partner would put up the money for the exhibit itself. "That would go over great if things work out as we hope they will," Ray said.

The conservancy is also working to convince other non-profits to embrace park projects.

Board chair Ray gets juiced every time he visits New York. "My favorite thing isn't the museums, it's the park, walking through it, jogging through it, seeing all the stuff that's going on, it's just incredible," Ray said. "If your great-great-great-grandparents were part of the creation of Central Park, you would know about that. It's a legacy. This thing is going to be around for a thousand years."

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GARDEN: The future Great Park botanical garden is planned for the area at upper left in this aerial photo, which shows the closed El Toro Marine Air Base as it appeared in December 2005.

