



THE MAN IN CHARGE: Rod Cooper was recently hired by the Great Park Corp. as manager of operations for the park.

LEONARD ORTIZ, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

ROD COOPER

Age: 62

Job: Operations and maintenance manager for the Great Park Corp.

Pay: \$88,354 to \$131,281

Lives: In an apartment near the Irvine Spectrum. He and his wife also have a home in the Northern California city of Elk Grove.

Family: Married to wife, Susan, for 28 years. Two children: Sarah, 34; Susie, 38.

Hobbies: Cooking, cheering on Ohio State football team.

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Planning the Great Park

Rod Cooper will oversee operations when it opens in 2009, but already has leases to manage.

By SONYA SMITH
The Orange County Register

IRVINE – Among the jobs of the newly hired Great Park manager is making the park profitable and, critical to the park's success, keeping the restrooms clean.

"If the restrooms aren't clean," Rod Cooper said, "people won't be happy."

The Great Park Corp. recently hired Cooper, 62, to operate and maintain the park.

Even though the Great Park isn't expected to open until 2009, Cooper was hired early to manage leases on the old El Toro Marine Corps Air Station and to consult on the park's design.

What does your job include now, without a park to operate?

There are several leases – such as storage for RVs and a green waste company that operates on site. I'll be dealing with all the leases and looking for new revenue possibilities.

I've also helped on the designs so far in explaining maintenance issues; the design team has listened very well.

What did you do before working at the Great Park?

My most relevant experience was when I worked for 12½ years as director of L.A. County's Parks and Recreation Department. I helped to oversee Raging Waters, an RV campground, regional parks, lakes, natural areas, the Hollywood Bowl, the Ford theater, some areas on Catalina Island and about 60 local parks.

What did you learn in that job?

I worked on a number of private/public partnerships. I also learned a lot about the diversity of people that make up Los Angeles County – 60 percent of Los Angeles' population was not born in the United States. We had a lot of challenges in making everyone's wishes come true in a finite amount of space.

What have you learned in working previously on projects with public and private entities?

Trust on both sides is key. In a good relationship, once the contracts are signed, you don't need to enforce them and look at them a few times each week. In a problematic relationship, the contracts are needed to enforce the rules.

What in your career are you most proud of?

Being part of the Hollywood Bowl renovation. It was an icon for a long, long time, and we raised enough money to renovate the entire facility. It culminated in funding a new shell for the Bowl – I think it's now set for the next 30 to 40 years.

What is it like being involved at this time in creating the Great Park?

It'll be really satisfying to see buildings rise out of the dirt and then to see families and people enjoying the park.

What do you think is the biggest challenge in your job for the Great Park?

I have the opportunity to be part of this team at the beginning; I'm not inheriting any challenges. By building this from scratch in a sense, we're kind of creating our biggest challenges.

But, right now our challenge is in working with the board, staff, our partners and the public to create something very special here. All we have is bare dirt and money.

Is this your last job?


I retired from Southgate after about three years. For six months, I evaluated my life and I said, 'You know, I really hate this.' So I started back to work.

I intend on being here for quite a while. I'm happy doing what I'm doing, just like my dad. He is in his 80s and still working about seven acres as a farmer. He can walk me into the dirt.

What is necessary in maintaining the Great Park?

Good maintenance is critical. My thoughts are that the park has to be clean and well-maintained for people to enjoy it at a basic level. If the restrooms aren't clean, for example, people won't be happy. ... Maintenance will also make the park more sustainable.

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