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Price tag on O.C.'s Great Park is marked up

Developer now says the urban oasis will cost more than \$1 billion.

By David Reyes
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Orange County's Great Park, envisioned as a dramatic landscape of man-made lakes, streams and a rugged canyon in the middle of suburbia, will cost more than \$1 billion to create.

The new estimate, revealed during a park board study session last week, reflects costs of the park's updated design. The original estimate was far less than \$1 billion.

The facility, which will be built on the former El Toro Marine Base, would be one of the largest urban parks in the nation.

Planners said the park would take shape in phases with some features appearing within several years, while more dynamic changes to the flat, barren landscape would take decades.

Money for the work is expected to come from fees and taxes from the housing that will be built on the edges of the park.

"That means no new taxes for the citizens of Irvine," said Michael Pinto, a park board member.

While demolition of the former El Toro base continues, a two-year grading project will begin by fall that will dramatically alter the landscape as workers carve out a 21-acre lake, the giant canyon and an amphitheater area.

"We won't have buildings, but in two years we will have a complete park outlined by the grading so people can visit and picnic, hike and go bicycling," Pinto said.

At 1,347 acres, the park will be larger than Manhattan's 843-acre Central Park but smaller than Los Angeles' 4,200-acre Griffith Park.

The new cost estimate reflects the design of Ken Smith, a New York landscape architect, who heads the park's design team.

The Great Park will include a botanical garden, museums and foot bridges, athletic fields, research facilities, wildlife corridor and miles of trails.

Tethered-balloon rides are set to launch this summer, although a nearby mini-park won't be ready for a year, officials said.

The initial phase is expected to cost about \$450 million and will feature a visitor center, athletic fields, orchards and a park entrance with fountains, reflective pools, a cafe and a 300-foot-wide rectangular steel gateway.

But Yehudi Gaffen, a design team spokesman, told the park board that planning and cost estimates "will change many, many times" as the master plan evolves.

For example, the amphitheater can have a wide cost range depending on how the structure is built and the number of seats, he said.

Costs per seat can be a low \$1,000 or up to \$20,000, depending on the sophistication of the theater, Gaffen said. "We assumed a cost of \$7,000 per seat with a 10,000-seat theater, so we embedded an estimate of \$70 million."

"At least, that's a starting point," he added.

The park will be at the center of a massive, 3,700-acre development by Lennar Corp., a home builder.

Lennar paid the U.S. Navy \$649.5 million for the base in 2005 and then transferred land for the park to Irvine.

The developer has approval to build 3,500 homes and about 5 million square feet of commercial and retail space. It recently proposed increasing the number of homes to 9,500, which would have drastically boosted city property taxes, but then shelved that plan.

The park corporation has about \$200 million in development fees from Lennar, Gaffen said. In addition, the developer has committed \$201 million for roads, sewers and water infrastructure, he said.

"Our big mantra is the park will only be built with available funds ... as the funds arrive," he said.

The park's development is not without controversy. After April's decision by the Irvine City Council to assume authority over the park, the Orange County Grand Jury produced a critical review.

In June, the grand jury suggested the ambitious plan could founder if left in the hands of Irvine city leaders rather than a more diverse group of county residents. Irvine city leaders rejected the concern.

The grand jury recommended an elected board chosen from across the county take over the park's development. The land had been turned over to the city after Orange County voters killed plans for an international airport, opting for park zoning.

The park board is made up of the five Irvine council members and four others, including Pinto, the founder and president of the Laguna Canyon Foundation, which led efforts to preserve Laguna Canyon.

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

Great Park price

The cost of building the Great Park in Orange County will be about \$1.1 billion, with the initial phase expected to cost about \$450 million.

Estimated cost of building the Great Park

(in millions of dollars)

Project feature	Phase 1	Total
Upper Canyon	\$32	\$189
North open space corridor		42
Great lawn/orchard		19
Upper grove	34	34
Trabuco entry	35	35
Fields 3 and 4	4	8
Visitors center	28	28
Northwest (com.) sports park		137
Timeline	4	9
Primary maint. area	1	11
Lower grove and sports park inserts	32	32
Orchard parking	17	41
Amphitheater	4	89
Lower canyon, lakes	86	112
Wetlands corridor	10	38
Field 2		4
Memorial area	1	4
Maintenance area	2	7
South open space corridor		11
Wildlife corridor	12	72
Conservatory bridge/botanical garden	29	78
Lower wildlife corridor	48	48
Site preparation/demolition	8	8
Mass/rough grading	35	35
Backbone utilities	37	37

Sources: Great Park Design Studio, Orange County Great Park Corp.

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