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Runway demolition will begin next month at Great Park site

Fourteen acres of runway will make way for sports fields to come in 18-24 months

By **SEAN EMERY**
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IRVINE – Portions of the runways at the old El Toro Marine Corps air base are scheduled for demolition this fall, months after the company originally hired to do the work left following lengthy delays.

Officials say that approximately 14 acres of runway near the Great Park balloon site and preview park will be broken up beginning next month, and removed in the fall, after summer programs at the park are completed.

Great Park Board Chairman Larry Agran in his "State of the Park" address on Thursday indicated that the runway removal will make way for sports fields, which park leaders hope to open within the next 18 to 24 months.

Lennar Corp. is in charge of the runway removal, Great Park CEO Sharon Landers said, as well as infrastructure projects shared by the Great Park and the home builder's adjacent development.

Lennar officials declined to comment on the runway removal except to acknowledge that they will oversee the work.

Lennar hired Recycled Materials Co. in June 2005 to remove runways after purchasing the bulk of the base from the federal government. Officials plan to recycle runway material for future Great Park construction.

Recycled Materials began work in 2006, removing about 1 percent of the runway before Lennar halted the construction, Senior Project Manager Mark Wachal said. Lennar and Recycled Materials spent a year trying to hammer out a long-term contract, Wachal said, as Recycled Materials assisted with several small projects such as the preparation for the balloon site and the 27.5-acre preview park.

Recycled Materials in January abruptly closed its Great Park office and returned to Colorado.

"When we saw that they weren't going to do anything and extend us further, we just couldn't wait any longer," Wachal said.

Recycled Materials has kept in touch with the Great Park Corp., Wachal said, but has not spoken to Lennar officials. Great Park officials are still working to determine exactly where to store the runway material until it can be recycled for later construction, he said.

"We're offering scenarios of doing it all at once or doing it in phases," Wachal said. "There is no answer on it yet, and I think it is part of the puzzle of where the park goes next in terms of development."

The ailing housing market has forced Lennar in the months since Recycled Materials' departure to shift its focus to the Lifelong Learning District, a mix of educational, commercial and, eventually, residential uses along the western perimeter of the park.

With designers expected to complete the park's schematic design early next year, Great Park leaders have also shifted their focus westward for the first phases of construction, which is expected to include a sports park, entry gate and garden area.

"Nothing can move forward until those runways are torn up and we have the infrastructure developed," said Councilwoman Christina Shea, who also serves as a Great Park board member.

Rather than wait for Lennar, Agran said the Great Park Corp. may carry out some work on its own.

"We will move forward in a partnership with (Lennar's) Great Park Neighborhoods whenever possible," Agran said. "But we will be prepared to move ahead on our own as necessary."

Shea expressed concern for what she characterized as delays in runway demolition. The work would both open the door for Great Park development and serve as a symbolic victory for those who fought against turning the base into a commercial airport, she said.

"People need to see that those runways are gone, that the airport battle is over with," Shea said.

Landers said that the runway construction is on track.

"Other than the initial demolition that was required by the balloon and the preview park, there hasn't been a request by us to remove the runway," Landers said.

Since portions of the runway are still being leased out for RV storage, bringing the Great Park millions in revenue annually, the runway demolition will likely take place in phases, Landers said.

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