

Spending balloons to enhance park

Irvine plans to spend \$14 million on amenities at the Great Park and still give free rides, despite some objections.

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In another small step toward the construction of the Orange County Great Park, Irvine will spend \$14 million during the next year and a half to spruce up the area around the tethered orange balloon ride that opened this summer by surrounding it with five acres of grass, shade trees, benches and tables, the Great Park board decided Thursday.

"This is intended to make the experience more park-like, giving people something to do other than just ride the balloon," said park spokeswoman Marsha Burgess.



GRAPHIC

Balloon soars, so does cost

About 30,000 passengers have boarded the helium balloon in the four months since it opened, enjoying views of Orange County from 500 feet in the air.

Although completion of the 1,347-acre park is decades away, Ken Smith, the landscape architect designing it, said the open space around the balloon would give a preview of what is to come.

"The balloon was born out of the idea of giving the public access to the site while we're still building the park," he said. "Now that we have the balloon up, we're realizing we actually have to provide amenities," he said.

The expansion of the popular attraction is leading some officials to question the city's fiscal stewardship as it continues offering free rides, even as expenses grow substantially.

"Most people think the balloon is a fun park feature, but there are a lot of us who have concerns that money is being spent too quickly," said Adam Probolsky, an Irvine planning commissioner who thinks the city should charge for the rides.

The city plans to expand operating hours of the balloon, which runs four days a week, to include weekend night flights, and to start an antique military aircraft collection that eventually would become a museum.

Other new features would include video screens mounted on structures that would provide shade for passengers waiting in line and new educational exhibits about the park. The balloon is the first feature of a \$1 billion project to convert the El Toro Marine base into one of the nation's largest urban parks.

The \$14 million would come from funds that were going to be used to demolish buildings and reshape land on the former base, work that would not have been started for at least a year.

Operating the balloon and the surrounding park would cost the city \$4.2 million a year, an increase from the current \$1.7 million, putting a greater strain on a project officials have pledged to fund without raising taxes.

The city plans to sell souvenirs and food, and field bids from corporate sponsors to help offset costs, but the board decided to continue the free rides indefinitely, rejecting a proposal that would have charged passengers to ride the balloon at night.

Some members of the Great Park board, made up of the Irvine City Council and four members it appoints, objected to the free rides, saying they would put the city in the red. The night flights would cost an additional \$750,000 to pay for night pilots and visitor center staff.

City officials previously had committed to free balloon rides only until the end of the year.

Councilwoman Christina Shea said it was unwise not to charge for the rides. "If our policy continues this way, I'm afraid we'll have long-term financial issues down the road," she said.

Board Chairman Larry Agran disagreed, saying the city should not charge for "anything and everything." Instead, he said, the city should pursue corporate sponsors and charge for private rentals. "That's where the real money is," he said.

The expansion of the park would include some unusual expenses, such as \$1.8 million to buy and refurbish two portable restrooms and two tents, one of which would will be used to house corporate sponsors, \$90,000 to move a visitor reception tent fewer than 500 feet, and \$500,000 to acquire and maintain two military aircraft.

The park's construction is being funded largely through development fees paid by Lennar Corp., the developer that plans to build as many as 9,500 homes around the park. Property taxes from those homes and businesses would be another large source of funds.

Once the balloon site goes through its expansion, the city would have about \$87 million left in its parks fund. About 10% of the park has been designed.