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Take sneak peek at final design of Great Park

How old El Toro base will be transformed into Great Park in Irvine.

By **SEAN EMERY**

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IRVINE – Great Park designers who have spent three years and millions of dollars creating a detailed vision of an ambitious central park are ready to unveil their newly completed plans to the public – as park leaders gear up for construction of the much-debated project.

The former El Toro airbase may be ground zero for Great Park development, but the project's key architects are based in a nondescript office park a few miles away. In a crowded office filled with tables covered with schematic drawings and busy designers glued to their computer terminals, lead designer Ken Smith today provided a sneak peek at his team's most detailed plans yet to transform an abandoned military installation into a project on par with the country's most prestigious central parks.

"One of the things that is difficult to grasp is the scale of the project on the one hand and the level of detail on the other," Smith said. "At one level we are designing this big park, but on another level we are designing small parks within it."

Officials say the completion of the comprehensive plans marks an important shift in the park's development, with Great Park leaders now expected to turn their attention toward actual construction.

"I just want to see bulldozers start moving the earth around," Smith said. "We need to start building it in as big a way as we can."

The detailed designs reflect the complexity in designing a modern, ecologically friendly park that retains echoes of the area's agricultural and military past, while at the same time giving visitors the amenities they have come to expect.

Along the way, the park's major components – such as sports fields, cultural gathering points, a protected wildlife corridor and a central lake – have remained, albeit rendered with much greater detail, Smith said.

That attention to detail was apparent in a series of small-scale physical models scattered throughout the design studio today. One showed a shade structure with a detailed roof that Smith said was based on a digital model of cloud movement. Another demonstrated a rustic, "state-park" inspired parking lot with torn up runway material made to look like natural rock formations.

"The level of detail is important to make sure it actually works," Smith said. "The scale of the park makes things possible that you couldn't do on a smaller-scale project. The difficult thing is making the park hang together at the end of the day."

The comprehensive design is also meant to address continued criticism over the pace of Great Park development, said Larry Agran, an Irvine councilman and Great Park chairman.

"I think this provides an answer to those who, largely out of ignorance, have asked 'what have you been doing the last few years,' and 'where have the tens of millions of dollars been spent?' " Agran said. "If you want to do something on this scale that is this great, you have to invest the money up front in planning and design, because the payoff is enormous."

Along with the comprehensive design, Great Park contractors next week are also expected to present the board with a series of construction projects they can carry out in the next two or three years with their current funds. The first projects on the block include four to eight soccer fields, permanent agricultural space, and grading to make way for a garden area, and a portion of the Great Park Canyon.

Councilwoman Christina Shea was pleased that the design is moving along, but questioned the city's ability to fund large-scale construction at the park.

"We can certainly move forward with a sports park, but you won't see much past that until this economy turns around," Shea said, claiming the Great Park Corp. will have about \$90 million left after the current fiscal year comes to an end.

The burden for much of the park's shared infrastructure is expected to fall on Lennar Corp., which purchased the bulk of the base in 2005 and then gave the Great Park land and \$200 million to the city in return for the right to build residential, retail and industrial projects around the park. The developer, however, has been forced to scale back their initial development plans due to the ailing housing market.

Agran said the city was working to accommodate Lennar's changing business plans.

"I believe we are going to find a way to move forward together," Agran said. "But if we need to move forward ahead of Great Park Neighborhoods we can as well. We do have the funds."

Despite the winding down of the design portion of the Great Park, Smith said he plans to stay with the project for the long haul.

"My job is to keep the overall ideas intact," Smith said. "This is my baby."

