

The fate of the Great Park

Mired in local politics and greed, Orange County's park overseers need a broader view.

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Measure W was always more about keeping a giant airport out of south Orange County's groomed backyard than about public playgrounds. Even so, it proved an inspired political ploy, persuading Orange County voters [six years ago](#) today to bury airport plans for the shuttered El Toro Marine base and erect a 4,700-acre Great Park instead. It would be a suburban Central Park, airport opponents crowed. Recyclers would rip up the old runways for free to get the asphalt. By 2008, children would play on its fields.

The playing fields haven't happened. The recycler demolished 2% of the runways and then [decamped](#). At most, the park will be half the size originally envisioned. Lennar Corp., the builder whose residential and commercial project would fund much of the park, has been losing money and put the [brakes](#) on this and other development plans.

What the park has is an impressive [design](#) and a tethered helium balloon ride. The balloon, of course, is orange.

The culprits in this fiasco are greed and politics. An early agency charged with planning the future of El Toro washed its hands of the base, allowing the adjacent city of Irvine to annex it. The city's plan was for a developer to buy half the land, paying fees toward the park's creation. Irvine officials promised the park would be built and run under a separate, countywide organization. At first, it was working. But the City Council reneged, taking control of the project even though it was [lambasted](#) by the county grand jury. There have been allegations of contracting and hiring favoritism; now two Irvine council members are [suing](#) their own city.

The Great Park's advocates persuaded the public to accept their grand vision; for that, they deserve credit. It is no small accomplishment to conceive of a monumental civic legacy. Where they err is in placing politics and extravagant promotion over sober planning for a project that might justifiably take decades to complete.

Some of the project's worst headaches -- such as the housing downturn that stalled construction -- weren't within Irvine's power to prevent, and some will improve with time. The market will pick up. The fees will come in, though they might fall short of what's needed. But the Great Park belongs to a bigger constituency than Irvine, and bigger hands should guide its future. Its development should be taken away from municipal politicians and placed with a countywide body.

Many south Orange County residents probably don't much care. They have what they wanted -- empty skies overhead. Even the balloon has been grounded for now, after allegations that, tether or no, it was dangerously flouting flight regulations. The vanished fighter pilots of El Toro would love that one.