



The Register

Great Park map
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Wildlife corridor, stream are next Great Park focus

Integral natural elements will be 'looked at with awe,' says vice chairman of park board.

By SONYA SMITH
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

IRVINE - Bobcats, gnatcatchers, coyotes and streams are the next priority at the Great Park.

The Great Park Board unanimously decided Thursday to make a nearly 3-mile-long wildlife corridor and Agua Chinon, a stream currently covered by runways at the former El Toro Marine base, the next major elements of the Great Park. The board's recommendation will now be sent to Irvine's Finance Commission and City Council for final review.

"We're creating something here that in future years will be looked at with awe," said Michael Pinto, vice chairman of the Great Park Board and founder and president of the Laguna Canyon Foundation.

The wildlife corridor will provide a vital link for animals between the Cleveland National Forest

and the Coastal Hills Preserve, Pinto said. The Agua Chinon project will uncover a natural stream and convert it into a flood control channel.

The park's first feature is an orange helium balloon to launch July 14. The corridor and Chinon approval puts those ahead of the park's other elements that include a sports park, 10,000-seat amphitheater, 2½-mile-long canyon and museums.

Staff said moving ahead first with the wildlife corridor and Agua Chinon will allow the Great Park Corp. to work with the Lennar Corp.'s development schedule. Lennar, as the developer of homes, shops and businesses that will surround the park, is responsible for building part of the corridor and Chinon.

Ken Smith's design team will now get to work on construction-level drawings for the Agua Chinon project, which involves uncovering one of the natural streams that is now diverted under the El Toro base in clay pipes, concrete culverts and tunnels.

The Agua Chinon project was estimated in January to cost about \$37 million. Staff and designers will return with more detailed plans and a better cost estimate in 60 days for the board to review and possibly adopt.

Even though Agua Chinon must become a flood control channel, designers want it to look like a natural stream. Plans call for trails and bridges along the stream and possibly kiosks educating park visitors about the stream's restoration.

The people-restricted wildlife corridor will begin with building the corridor's main span – land between Irvine Boulevard and the Borrego flood control channel – for about \$13.4 million. The initial project will connect the corridor to the Cleveland National Forest, but not the southern coastal open space.

Great Park Engineer Pat Fuscoe said the corridor will still function without the southern portion. He said animals will be able to travel under train tracks to find a small wetlands area. Designers will return in the future with plans to complete the corridor, Fuscoe said.

Corridor construction will begin this summer and is expected to take two years. Crews will carve out the corridor's shape, finely grade the land, install drainage systems, irrigate the corridor and add plants to attract native animals. Staff will ask the Lennar Corp. to manage the construction.

Nine people came to Thursday's meeting to praise the corridor plans – some calling it an "act of courage." Dan Silver, executive director of the Endangered Habitats League, wrote to the board saying the corridor will fulfill the park's "environmental promise."

But some environmentalists prodded the board to continue supporting the corridor by both completing its southern end and by adding a more diverse and rich array of plants and trees.

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CANYON ILLUSION: About 2 miles long and 30 feet deep; excavated earth to be used to create 30-foot berms on either side, thus creating the illusion that the canyon is 60 feet deep. A variety of palm trees are planned throughout and perhaps some waterfalls. Watered by a perennial stream with a string of small pools.

Courtesy of Great Park

Next steps

Wednesday: Community Services Commission reviews the park's draft master plan.

June-July: Irvine City Council considers plans for building a mass transit system linking the Great Park, Irvine Spectrum and Irvine train station.

Early July: Planning Commission gives final review of the park's draft master plan.

July 12: Two-year anniversary of the Lennar Corp. buying the old El Toro base from the Navy and giving 1,347 acres to Irvine for the Great Park.

July 14: Orange balloon launches.

Mid-2008: Lennar plans to have its first homes open for sale on the company's development that will surround the park.

Source: Great Park Corp., Lennar Corp., City of Irvine

Map