

The 'X' Factor

Irvine city politics cast shadow over The Great Park.



The city of Irvine and Orange County are on the verge of making history. But you wouldn't know it based on the headlines of late that are casting a growing shadow over the development of the Orange County Great Park – perhaps the single most important initiative locally over the next quarter-century. If done right, this regional treasure will deliver miles of open space, bike trails, scores of sorely-needed athletic fields, an outdoor amphitheater, dedicated acreage for nonprofit organizations and a setting where families of all colors, creeds and cultures can gather and spend time in the heart of one of America's great communities.

The money, brainpower and desire are in place to transform the former El Toro air base into one of the world's most unique municipal parks. This opportunity is within our grasp. With the recent selection of a New York architectural firm to head up the critical design phase of the Great Park, we've never been closer to seeing this project go forward. If all goes well, in 6-9 months architect

Ken Smith will present a master plan for the 1,369-acre park with its proposed centerpiece – a 2-mile-long, 30-foot-deep canyon with streams and natural habitat. Construction would begin in 2007 and the park would become a reality near the end of the decade. This is truly once-in-a-lifetime stuff.

The trouble is, Irvine politics are again clouding the moment. Two weeks ago, word leaked out that the Orange County Grand Jury has launched an inquiry into the role Irvine officials have played in planning and contracting the park. Questions have also been raised about money spent visiting projects designed by three Great Park finalists, including travel to Europe. Last fall, one of the most credible names on the 9-member Great Park board, retired Irvine Co. executive Richard Sim, resigned because of what he viewed as waste and cronyism in managing the planning process and hiring consultants. Sim renewed his criticism recently, telling the Los Angeles Times that the park board has "spent millions, and they don't have anything to show for it." Now, Irvine Councilman Larry Agran, who is chairman of the park board, finds himself in a new political fight. Former ally UC Irvine professor Mark Petracca has accused Agran of authoring political mailers attacking his opponents. Agran denies the assertions, which if true are more an ethical issue than a legal one.

The Agran-Petracca row may seem like inside baseball to most people outside of Irvine. But when combined with mounting questions about the Great Park planning process, it creates an uneasy feeling. And it comes at a time when stability, consensus and credibility are vital to the park's ultimate success. To his credit, Agran says he welcomes the Grand Jury's review of park board actions. The board will ultimately be responsible for more than a half-billion dollars in expenditures. It is both prudent and necessary at this juncture to make sure all is square on this immense project.

It's time to either clean up any problems and move on or replace those in charge. The entire county has a stake in the Great Park. I sincerely hope that the political agendas of a few in Irvine do not spoil a great moment for the rest of us. **OCM**

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