

O.C. Great Park-airport debate didn't leave him bitter

A former Newport Beach mayor fought hard for an international airport on the El Toro Marine base, but he lost that battle. Now he wishes the park's developers well.

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I'm looking at a year-old brochure about the Great Park. Looks pretty cool. It features a drawing of blue skies, billowy clouds, birds flying by, people walking to and fro. It touts the projected opening date of the park's "first phase" in 2009.

Now I'm looking at another brochure, identifying a couple dozen features of that first phase, expected to be at varying stages of completion in 2009.

Well, it would have been nice.

Instead, Great Park planners -- who have filled our heads in recent years with wondrous visions of a world-class Orange County park to rival the country's best but so far have given us only balloon rides -- are thinking smaller now.

Not smaller as in forever, but for the time being. Instead of a fairly big rollout in 2009, we've got a first phase now limited to a "Preview Park." And despite the best efforts of park spokeswoman Marsha Burgess to explain it to me, I'm not sure exactly what that is.

But I must be candid: Picturing the "first phase" of a "Preview Park" doesn't exactly bowl me over. Call me when the 27-acre thing is done, which could be another couple years. Even so, that miniature park will hardly make a dent in the 1,350-acre Great Park we're waiting to see.

Speaking of which, I'm in my late 50s and in excellent health, but is it too cynical to ask if this park will be finished in my lifetime?

When park supporters sold it to voters as the alternative to the international airport on the former El Toro Marine Corps base, we assumed we'd be around to see it.

Right from the start, park supporters tossed out rosy timelines.

"Children will be playing in the county's largest sports park within three years of the sale of the property," boasted a colorful Irvine city mailer in late 2003. That projection would have the children frolicking this year.

Not so fast, kids.

The problem is that money to build the park was to have flowed from Lennar Corp.'s development around the park, but the housing slump has altered that.

The latest fallout was Lennar's decision last month to stop demolition of the runways, an obvious necessary step in the creation of the park.

Somewhere out there, the original airport backers are gloating.

I figured I'd find one Friday in Clarence Turner, a guy who had to listen to all the promises from the pro-park people in a long series of public meetings, media duels and countywide elections.

A former Newport Beach councilman and mayor, Turner spent 24 years of his life trying to get an airport built on the El Toro site.

Go ahead and gloat over the park's fits and starts, I told him.

He refused.

"El Toro is history," Turner says, using the shorthand for the airport's projected name. "We had our time at the plate, and we collectively blew it. We didn't make the case that we should have. The opposition was organized and they were very passionate about it, and we let that slip by."

If there's any lingering hostility in what was Orange County's most contentious policy debate in recent history, Turner, 74, doesn't show it.

"I'm not going out to volunteer at the park, but I don't want to wish ill will on the city of Irvine," he says. "I hope they don't run into a lot of problems. I hope it doesn't end up costing the citizens of Irvine an arm and a leg, because, as I said, they fought the good fight and they won."

Actually, most of South County opposed the airport. But it was Irvine that led the fight and is overseeing the park's planning, usually with something approaching righteous certitude.

I admire Turner's graciousness, but I ask if he's at all skeptical about the park. The short answer is no.

A project of this size would be tough enough for a private-sector developer, much less for a city, Turner says. "They think they understand this sort of project, but they really don't," he says.

So, how long will it take? "I don't know," Turner says, "but I suspect they will come up with something more than a balloon ride." He takes pains to say he's not being sarcastic.

I've never thought Orange County residents craved a "great park." Rather, South County fervently opposed the airport and the rest of the county's voters didn't have real passion for an international airport. Thus, it went down in electoral flames.

Turner shares that view and still kicks his side for not making a better case. It's a somewhat painful history that still gnaws at him.

"I became fixated with it," he says of the airport battle, "but in the final analysis it didn't work out."

It would be the ultimate irony if market forces or mismanagement or other unforeseen problems result in the Great Park not working out.

Turner doesn't foresee that outcome. "They'll make a lot of mistakes," he says of the park's planners, "but eventually it will work out for them. And I hope it does."