

\$475,000 earmark for improvements to Orange County Great Park

Despite congressional legislation that has already appropriated more than \$1 trillion in additional spending and close to another \$1 trillion in government loans, America's economy is hurting. Americans are looking to Congress to abandon a business-as-usual approach and extraordinary decisions that require political courage and sacrifice.

Congress cannot afford to lavish scarce taxpayer funds on parochial and non-essential interests. The FY 2009 omnibus appropriations bill includes a \$475,000 earmark for Orange Country Great Park in California.

This amendment would strike a low priority earmark for improvements to Orange County Great Park in Irvine, California.

Orange Country Great Park is the County's Largest Sports Park and home to a Botanical Garden and a Tethered Helium Observation Balloon

The Orange County Great Park is a project to turn a former Marine base closed by the Federal Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process in 1999, into a huge municipal park (1,347 acres) in Irvine, California. This effort is a public-private partnership with Lennar Corporation (a Fortune 500 home building company). Lennar Corporation was given the rights to develop property for residential, commercial and industrial construction in return for committing \$200 million to future development and maintenance of this park.¹

According to Orange County Great Park Corporation Website, "The Orange County Great Park Plan will provide a wide array of active and passive uses, including a 2.5 mile canyon and lake, miles of walking and biking trails, a cultural terrace, Orange County's largest sports park, a botanical garden, and a tethered helium observation balloon that will be an icon for the Great Park. More than 3,885 of the 4,700 acres will be dedicated to open space, education, and other public uses."²

¹ "About Us," Orange County Great Park Corporation <http://www.ocgp.org/about/default.asp> - accessed February 28, 2009

² "About Us," Orange County Great Park Corporation <http://www.ocgp.org/about/default.asp> - accessed February 28, 2009

Orange County Sports Park has a History of Questionable Spending Priorities

Unfortunately, questionable spending priorities have hampered the development of this project to a breaking point.

In 2007 before the slowing economy, the *L.A. Times* detailed waste and mismanagement with this huge project:

“As [visitors to the park] float skyward this summer aboard a \$5-million tethered helium balloon ride at Irvine’s Great Park, passengers on the free attraction might notice some unusual amenities on the ground:

- “a \$300,000 tent – designed to resemble an airplane hangar – that costs \$75,000 a year to clean;
- “a four-person visitor center crew hired under a \$370,000 annual contract;
- “a series of orange dots painted along the park’s entrance road at a cost of \$14,000.

“When the 15-minute voyage ends, a French-trained pilot earning a six-figure salary will use a remote control to lower the craft to earth. The helium-filled airship attraction is expected to lose about \$850,000 its first year.”³

These spending mispriorities and an ordinance by the Irvine City Council which permitted visitors to ride the helium-filled airship attraction for free for months, prompted concerns from various local government officials that the initial \$850,000 deficit would slow or derail the \$1.1 billion project to transform “the former El Toro Marine base’s cracked airstrips and dusty terrain into a dramatic landscape of lakes, orchards, athletic fields, museums and a rugged, man-made canyon.”⁴

³Tony Barboza and Roy Rivenburg, “Great Park gets high profile - A balloon ride is the first attraction at O.C.’s planned suburban oasis,” July 13, 2007, Los Angeles Times, <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/jul/13/local/me-balloon13>

⁴Tony Barboza and Roy Rivenburg, “Great Park gets high profile - A balloon ride is the first attraction at O.C.’s planned suburban oasis,” July 13, 2007, Los Angeles Times, <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/jul/13/local/me-balloon13>

Additional costs included \$838,000 to build a road to the balloon, plant citrus trees and buy a \$300,000 special 50-by-50-foot tent that will serve as the visitor center, \$380,000 a year for two balloon pilots, a hostess and maintenance, \$100,000 a year for a balloon replacement fund, \$94,000 a year for portable restrooms, \$52,000 annually for security between 1 and 5 a.m., and \$30,000 a year for trash removal.⁵

Why should American taxpayers fund free rides on Helium balloons?

As the Project Fell Behind, the County Began Looking for Government Help

One year later, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, “Nearly three years after the city approved a massive residential and commercial development at the closed El Toro Marine base in exchange for a grand park in the heart of suburban Orange County, Irvine officials and struggling home builder Lennar Corp. are in talks about revising the landmark agreement.

No homes or businesses have been built. No grassy fields have been planted. And the runways – so hated by opponents of a proposed regional airport at the base – still sit mostly intact...

But for now, no timeline exists for when each park feature will be developed. Most of the future park’s 1,347 acres remain off limits to the public, with a balloon ride and a visitor’s center being the only public facilities – although a 27-acre “preview park” is under construction.”⁶

With Lennar experiencing consistent losses for a total of \$2.4 billion over six straight quarters (including the third quarter in 2008)⁷ and funding

⁵Tony Barboza and Roy Rivenburg, “Great Park gets high profile - A balloon ride is the first attraction at O.C.’s planned suburban oasis,” July 13, 2007, Los Angeles Times, <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/jul/13/local/me-balloon13>

⁶ Tony Barboza, “Irvine’s Great Park hasn’t exactly earned its name: Irvine and home builder Lennar are in talks about revising the landmark agreement to build the promised recreational area,” April 12, 2008, Los Angeles Times, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/apr/12/local/me-greatpark12>

⁷ Jeff Collins, “Lennar wants meaningful home aid,” September 23rd, 2008, Orange County Register, <http://lansner.freedomblogging.com/2008/09/23/lennar-wants-meaningful-home-aid/3776/>

sources drying up, the article pointed out that “officials are pursuing state and federal grants.”⁸

The bulk of the \$52 million the city spent up to that point, went to hire a team of dozens of design, engineering and public relations consultants, to build the balloon ride and to pay administrative staff.

Local officials blasted this misprioritization of funds. “To have nothing more than a balloon and the possibility of a 27-acre park is disappointing,” said county Supervisor Bill Campbel, “ They’re spending a lot on engineers, PR people and other things, and they’re not delivering.”⁹

State Assemblyman Todd Spitzer (R-Orange) also criticized the city for not building recreation facilities that could be used by the public, while wasting money on “a ridiculous, oversized balloon and free rides.”¹⁰

Funding for the Great Park in one of the Country’s Wealthiest Cities Should be Questioned in Light of the Recent Economic Downturn

California has been especially hard hit by the recent economic downturn.

California's unemployment rate jumped to 10.1% in January, the highest since 1983, as employers in the nation's most-populous state cut 79,000 jobs in the month. There were 3.3% fewer jobs in California than a year earlier. In total there are now 1,863,000 unemployed Californians – 754,000 more than in January 2008.¹¹

In addition, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger on February 27, 2009, declared a state of emergency to address California's third-straight year of

⁸ Tony Barboza, “Irvine’s Great Park hasn’t exactly earned its name: Irvine and home builder Lennar are in talks about revising the landmark agreement to build the promised recreational area,” April 12, 2008, Los Angeles Times, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/apr/12/local/me-greatpark12>

⁹ Tony Barboza, “Irvine’s Great Park hasn’t exactly earned its name: Irvine and home builder Lennar are in talks about revising the landmark agreement to build the promised recreational area,” April 12, 2008, Los Angeles Times, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/apr/12/local/me-greatpark12>

¹⁰ Tony Barboza, “Irvine’s Great Park hasn’t exactly earned its name: Irvine and home builder Lennar are in talks about revising the landmark agreement to build the promised recreational area,” April 12, 2008, Los Angeles Times, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/apr/12/local/me-greatpark12>

¹¹ Stu Woo, “California's Jobless Rate Soars to 10.1%,” February 28, 2009, Wall Street Journal, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123576619171196559.html#>

drought, ordering officials to take steps to reduce urban water consumption and to expedite water transfers throughout the state.¹²

This earmark is neither a priority for Californians or for all other Americans.

The residents of Irvine – the seventh richest city in America with median household incomes of \$98,923 and the median family incomes of is \$111,455¹³ – should also not look to the federal government to complete golf courses and pay for helium balloon rides. Nor should Orange County, home to more millionaires than almost any other place in the country¹⁴, and the 48th wealthiest county in the U.S. according to U.S. Census Bureau with a median household income of \$60,118. Nor should Orange County, the 48th wealthiest county in the U.S. according to U.S. Census Bureau with a median household income of \$60,118.¹⁵

By passing this amendment, Congress will not be asking taxpayers to bail out a failed public private partnership for “a ridiculous, oversized balloon and free rides.”¹⁶

¹² Stu Woo, “California’s Jobless Rate Soars to 10.1%,” February 28, 2009, Wall Street Journal, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123576619171196559.html#>

¹³ Ronald Campbell, “Three O.C. cities rank near top in U.S. income,” August 26th, 2008, Orange County Register, <http://ocbiz.freedomblogging.com/2008/08/26/three-oc-cities-rank-near-top-in-us-income/>

¹⁴ In 2006, OC was 3rd in the nation in millionaires (not including homes) with 113,000 households. http://www.ocregister.com/ocregister/homepage/abox/article_1076369.php

¹⁵ (<http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Products/Ranking/2003/R07T050.htm>).

¹⁶ Tony Barboza, “Irvine’s Great Park hasn’t exactly earned its name: Irvine and home builder Lennar are in talks about revising the landmark agreement to build the promised recreational area,” April 12, 2008, Los Angeles Times, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/apr/12/local/me-greatpark12>